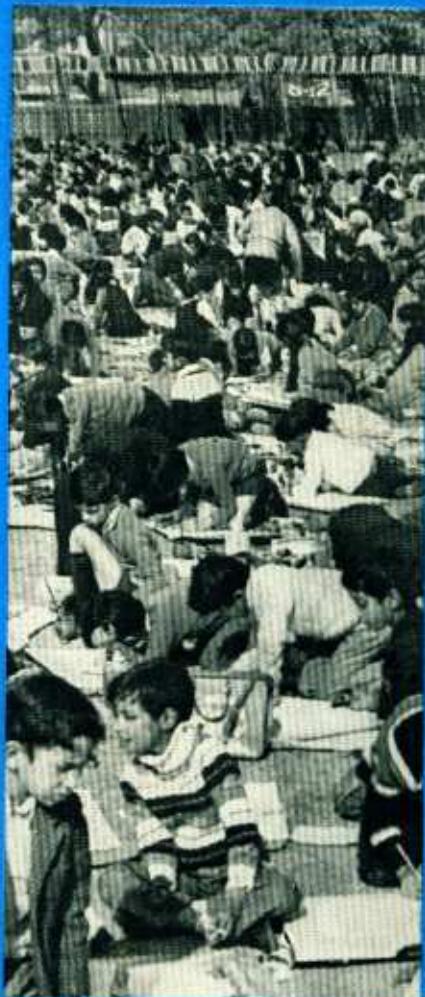


# SHANKAR



ALAKA SHANKAR

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By ALAKA SHANKAR



CHILDREN'S BOOK TRUST NEW DELHI

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Published by the Children's Book Trust, Nehru House, 4, Bahadur Shah Zafar Marg,  
New Delhi-110002 and printed at the Trust's Press, Indraprastha Press, New Delhi-110002.

IT was a sunny, bright day in Kayamkulam, a small town in Kerala, on the west coast of India. The land was an array of shades of green—wide stretches of paddy-fields, the stalks swaying gently in the cool, tropical breeze; groves of coconut and other palm trees, mango and jack fruit trees, flecked with pools and ponds and dotted with the grey thatches of huts and the brown tiled roofs of bigger houses. The calm silence was broken only by the twittering of birds and the buzzing of honey bees. There was a spark of colour that speckled the lush green whenever some brightly coloured butterflies fluttered by.

Amidst this calm atmosphere in Kayamkulam stood a large house. Though it belonged to a joint family, very few people lived there. There was the grand-uncle. And the grandmother. And the little grandson and his uncle. Everyone feared and respected the master of the house—a tall and dignified looking old man—grand-uncle of the lovable but naughty boy, Shankaran, who roamed about in the groves and hovered around the ponds, looking out for fun as well as mischief—away from the overbearing strict vigil of his grand-uncle.

The boy's kind and gentle grandmother followed him like a shadow, pampering him and keeping him out of trouble, especially with his grand-uncle, while his affectionate uncle stood by him always and went to his help in times of need.

Shankaran had no friends of his own age. Grand-uncle, who was known for his short temper and discipline, had forbidden him from playing with the other children of the village. He felt that the child would be spoilt in their company. They would also not come anywhere near the big house, afraid of the booming voice and sharp

tongue of Grand-uncle.

And so, Shankaran roamed about by himself in the sprawling compound abounding in trees and wild creepers. He would watch the bees flit from one flower to another, chase the butterflies, and stare at the owl sitting high up on a tree. Sometimes, he would try to imitate the calls of the birds and cries of the animals.

Though the house was large and there were very few people living there at that time, Shankaran was always busy. There were six ponds all around the house. There was one for the women of the house, one near the temple in the woods for serpent worship, one for the cattle, one for the kitchen and for all washing, and two more. Shankaran had special timings chalked out for visiting each one of these tanks. It coincided with the time when there would be some activity in the tank. He would chat with the servants when they washed utensils, and with the ladies when they bathed and washed their clothes. He would accompany his grandmother to the temple and splash his legs in the tank while she was at her prayers.

Shankaran could often be found near the tank behind the house, watching the fish glide in the water, or the kingfisher, stork, and other birds dive for their prey.

Another favourite haunt of Shankaran was the cowshed. There were many cows and bulls, and also bullock carts in which Shankaran loved to go for rides whenever his grand-uncle permitted him. He enjoyed playing with the naughty calves frisking in the backyard. The servants of the house and all those working on his grand-uncle's fields loved him. Shankaran was, therefore, never lonely.

It was, however, not all fun and play for young Shankaran. Like all children of his age, he also had to go to school. The first four years were spent at a 'vernacular' school, where Malayalam was the medium of instruction. The headmaster of that local school was fat and short, and very strict; there was never a smile on his face. All the children of the school were afraid of his booming voice and the sting of his cane. And Shankaran had to be especially careful, for, the headmaster was a friend of his grand-uncle!

Whenever he visited their house, the headmaster would give his grand-uncle an account of Shankaran's progress in school. Though he did not particularly like the boy because of his impish behaviour in school, he could not give any bad report about him, as he was one of the best students of his class. Whenever he called on

*Shankar—graduation*



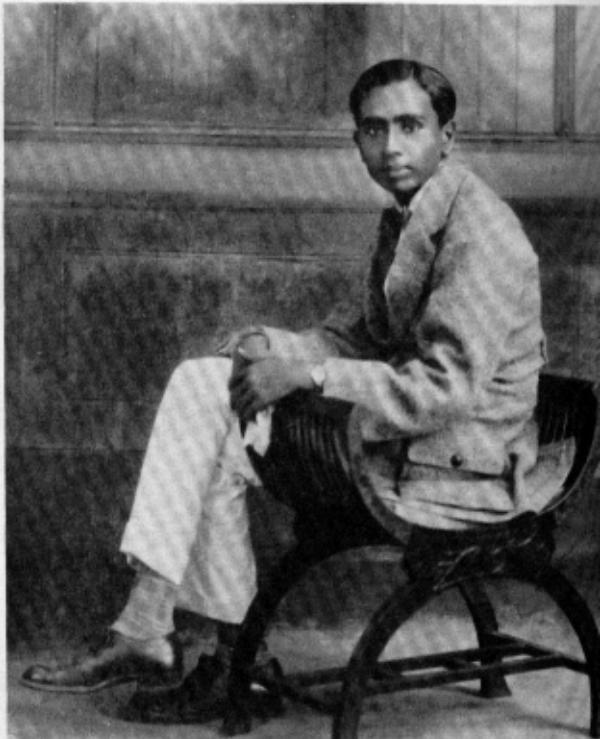
*Maharajah's College of Science, Trivandrum*





*Shankam—his bride-to-be*

*Shankar—after marriage*



the grand-uncle, he would say, "He is a clever and good student. He has a great future in store for him." He said this perhaps to please Shankaran's grand-uncle. And Grand-uncle liked to hear such praise, for, though he was strict with the boy, he was, in his heart of hearts, fond of him. And so, he would make the headmaster repeat his words of praise often and remark, "Do you really think *my* Shankaran is that clever?"

"Yes, oh yes! He's very clever. He'll grow up to be a great man," the wily headmaster would say.

Though flatteringly uttered, the headmaster's prediction came true. For Shankaran is none other than K. Shankar Pillai, fondly known to the old and the young alike as Shankar the cartoonist and a 'Pied Piper' to the children of the world.

# 2

**K**ESHAV Shankar Pillai was born on July 31, 1902 in Kayamgulam a small town in Travancore which was once a Princely State. Kerala which now comprises Travancore, Cochin, and Malabar, and is famed for its scenic beauty, has a deep-rooted culture—not only seen in its temples and palaces, but evident in the mannerisms and appearance of the people, and also in their sense of discipline, integrity, hard work, and perseverance.

Brought up against this background, Shankaran cherished and nourished these ideals and dreams of his early youth, which were to inspire him and edge him on to his goals, with always a new and brighter horizon emerging out of the one he had last reached.

Shankaran lost his father when he was a child. After his mother was remarried, he was brought up in the strict but loving care of his grand-uncle, grandmother, and uncle. His childhood was a happy one, spent with his kindly guardians whom he feared and respected. His love of nature, tenderness towards animals, respect for elders, and utter fearlessness marked the young boy from other children.

Shankaran was a restless child. Though he had to follow the daily routine for fear of his grand-uncle, his mind was alert—always on the look out for some fun, some adventure. But his mischiefs were harmless. He had no hatred for anyone, be they human beings or animals.

One of the most memorable incidents of Shankaran's childhood is when he caught a crocodile. He had seen a crocodile in the big tank behind his house during the rainy season, eating up all the fish. He felt sorry for the fish, and had wanted to drive away the crocodile. He would hide behind a tree and pelt the crocodile with stones and

bricks whenever it came out of the water to bask in the sun. He did this many a time, but the crocodile would just not leave the tank.

Suddenly, he struck upon an idea. He had once seen a stray dog caught in a noose. 'I'll also catch the crocodile in a noose,' said Shankaran to himself, very excited. He combed the cowshed and found a long, strong rope. He dare not do anything when his grand-uncle was at home. His chance came soon, when Grand-uncle had gone to a nearby town on business.

Shankaran charged down to the cowshed, and took the long rope he had hidden in the loft. Making a noose at one end of the rope, he hung it at the opening the crocodile had made in the fence. He had observed the crocodile going by that way every night in search of more fish. He tied the other end of the rope securely to a tree.

Shankaran could hardly sleep that night. He kept wondering, 'Will the crocodile fall into my trap?' Early morning, he ran down to the fence and to his delight, he found the huge crocodile with the noose tight around his neck, struggling in vain to get itself free.

"I've caught the rogue! I've caught him!" he shouted joyously, as he ran in and dragged his uncle out of bed. "I've caught a crocodile!" he yelled.

That day Shankaran was a hero. As news of his bravery went round, his grandmother, the servants of the house, the workers from the fields, the neighbours, and others from the village, all came to see the captive crocodile. Grandmother was weeping, maybe with pride or out of fear for her little grandson. 'Who knows, he could have been eaten up by the crocodile?' she thought.

Helped by his uncle, Shankaran managed to tie another long rope around the crocodile's tail. With the help of a pole, the two of them managed to drag the heavy weight to the courtyard in front of the house. When Grand-uncle returned home later that day, he saw a huge crowd at his house. He went closer, and to his amazement he saw that they were all standing around a crocodile! And the crowd included Shankaran's classmates and his class teacher, too. They were very excited and proud of Shankaran.

Shankaran did not want to hurt the crocodile. Nor did he allow the people to throw stones at it or poke it with poles, but they would not heed his protests. And then, his grand-uncle's voice thundered out from behind them. "Leave the crocodile alone and get out of this place! All of you!" No one could defy his orders. They all went

away, grumbling.

“Shankaran! Set the crocodile free!” Grand-uncle commanded.

With the help of his uncle once again, Shankaran dragged the crocodile to the tank near the village temple, where other crocodiles lived, and set it free. Shankaran would often stealthily make his way to the temple tank and watch the crocodile leisurely bask in the sun.

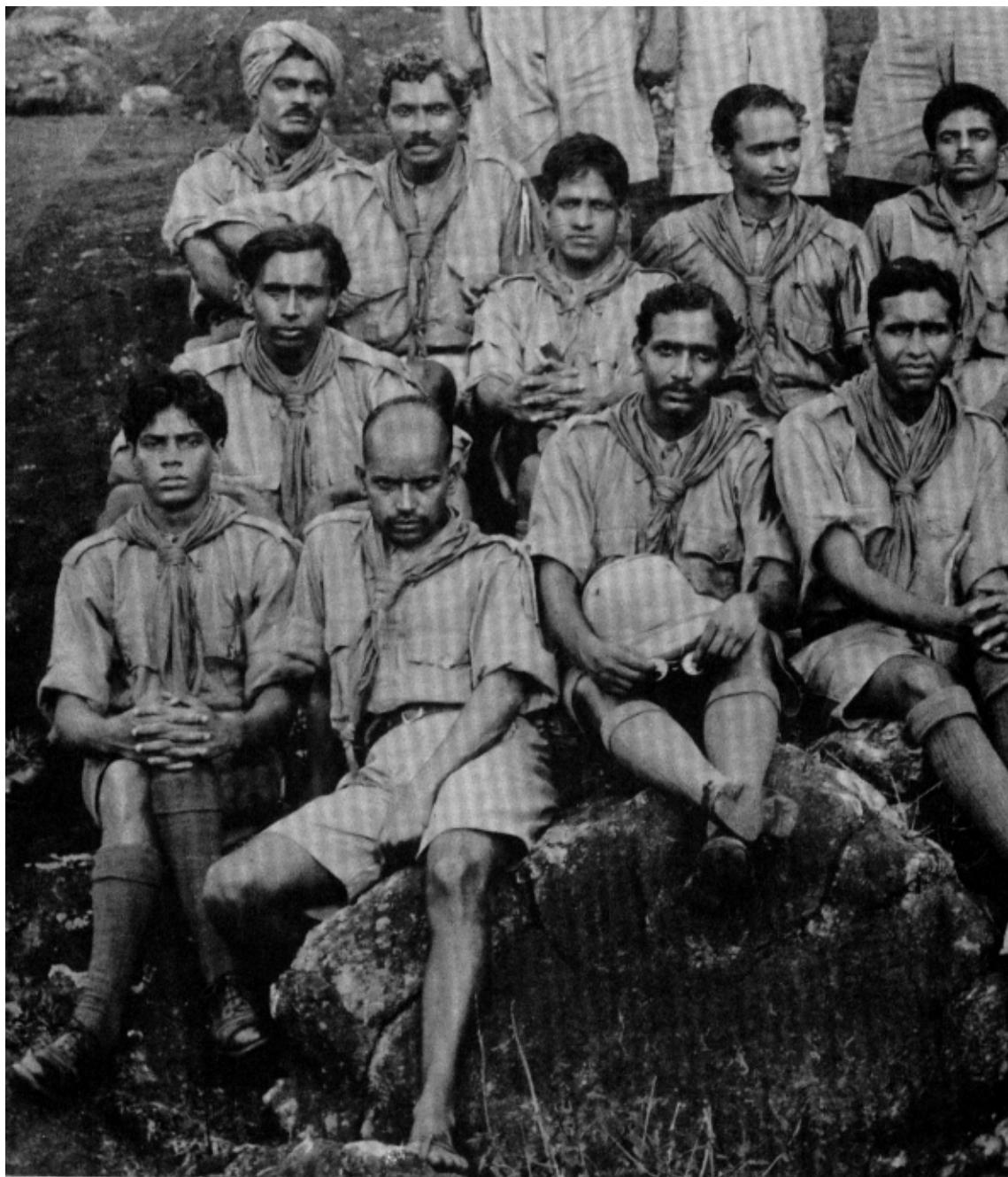
Another incident of Shankaran’s naughty childhood, as retold by one of his classmates, took place when he was eight years old. His target of fun was the headmaster himself. None of the children liked him. He was too strict.

One day, their teacher was absent, and the headmaster himself went to their class to teach them mathematics. There was pin drop silence as he wrote out five sums on the blackboard. He asked them to do all the five before the class was over. He then sat down on the chair, took off his turban, and kept it on the table. The students were for once on their best behaviour. So, he decided to take it easy. He raised his legs and rested them on the table and made himself more comfortable. Soon he was fast asleep.

All the children, including Shankaran, quickly finished doing the five sums. But they dared not make any noise, for fear of the headmaster’s cane. So, they sat in silence, watching him and listening to his snore. Shankaran thought the headmaster looked very funny reclining in that position. He decided to draw a picture of him. When he was through, Shankaran was quite pleased with the result. The same round face and beady eyes, the bald head and the bulging tummy, the bare legs up on the table, with the *dhoti* ridden up. Shankaran could hardly wait to show it to his friends.

The bell rang and the headmaster jumped up. After hurriedly checking their answers, he left the classroom. When Shankaran at last showed the drawing to his classmates, they all roared with laughter and could not stop laughing. They had no doubt who it was in the drawing. “The headmaster looks so funny,” shouted one of them. “Shankaran has really done a good job of it.”

In the meantime, the teacher for the next class walked in. He was furious with the din and demanded to know the reason for all the commotion. Shankaran’s drawing was promptly produced. The teacher, at first, smiled, but suddenly realised that the students were watching his reaction. Putting on a serious look, he took the drawing and walked out, straight to the headmaster’s room. Soon,



*Shankar at a Scout's Camp while in College (second row, extreme left)*



*Shankar at work in 'The Hindustan Times'*

Shankaran was sent for by the headmaster. Shankaran's fate was sealed. Just as everybody had expected.

The headmaster was fretting and fuming. "Did you draw this?" he shouted.

"Yes," admitted Shankaran, meekly.

"You're suspended from the class for two weeks. Now get out!" the headmaster roared.

Shankaran's friends were upset. They made all sorts of plans to get even with the headmaster. But Shankaran's thoughts were elsewhere. What he was afraid of was his grand-uncle's wrath.

The headmaster wasted no time. That very evening, he came to meet Shankaran's grand-uncle. He was still fretting and fuming. On seeing the headmaster, Shankaran quietly hid himself behind a door, and peeped through a gap.

"Shankaran is becoming a nuisance in the school," the headmaster grumbled.

"What has he done?" Grand-uncle asked, his eyebrows making furrows on the forehead.

"See for yourself," the headmaster growled, and produced the drawing.

Shankaran could now hardly breathe. He was afraid his grand-uncle would call him soon and give him a sound thrashing. He saw Grand-uncle looking at the drawing interestedly for a moment. He then suddenly burst out laughing. "Has Shankaran *really* done this? I didn't know he could draw so well!" he exclaimed and laughed even louder.

The headmaster was shocked at such a reaction to a serious matter. But Shankaran felt relieved.

Shankaran was also a dreamer. He was often caught in the class, staring out of the window. How he wished he could freely roam about wherever he pleased, instead of being tied down to such mundane routine of listening to all sorts of boring lessons day after day.

Always being inquisitive, right from his early childhood, he would rest his mind only when he found satisfactory answers to his questions and solutions to his problems. Sometimes, even his teachers were at a loss for an answer. Very often, after dinner, he would sit in the verandah, when Grand-uncle would patiently try to answer all the questions young Shankaran would put to him. But it did not end

there. Sometimes, his uncle also would be roped in to these sessions and he had to satisfy Shankaran with fuller information about the trees and other vegetation around, the work in the fields, the climate, and a lot more.

Though Shankaran feared his grand-uncle, his curiosity to know and learn made him follow Grand-uncle about the place. Once, when his grand-uncle was walking in the grove behind the house, Shankaran followed him. It had just then stopped raining and the air was fresh. Grand-uncle stopped in his path and bent down to pick up a jasmine flower from a shrub under a sandalwood tree. Shankaran ran to the sandalwood tree and holding the trunk, shook it with all his might. The water that had collected on the leaves came sprinkling down. In the process, Grand-uncle was drenched. Being meticulous about his dress, he was furious with this foolish behaviour of Shankaran. He chased the frightened lad, who ran all the way home and hid himself in the folds of his grandmother's sari.

Shankaran's thirst for knowledge was never quenched. And it went to such an extent that even Grandmother had sometimes to face his incessant questioning. Of course, her field of knowledge was restricted to her kitchen and cooking, to her gods and temple rituals.

Shankaran loved good food. He would often be found hanging around the kitchen, trying his hand at chopping vegetables or keenly watching the ingredients being put in the curries and other dishes. Whatever he had observed in his childhood stood him in good stead in the later years when he had to live by himself and prepare his own food. His young friends often made a bee-line to taste the food he would have made for himself.

Like all other boys of his age, Shankaran liked outdoor life, enjoyed good food, evaded getting caught after playing pranks, and hated school! Inwardly, he was however different. He was very sensitive and loving, especially towards harmless creatures. He would himself suffer mentally whenever he saw anyone else in trouble; he would go all out to help them.

One day, he was on a visit to his aunt's house a few miles away when he saw a dog chasing a baby squirrel. He shooed the dog away and gently picked up the squirrel. It was trembling and shaking all over with fear. Shankaran decided to take it home.

On seeing what he had brought with him, there were loud protests at home. One argument was that the baby squirrel would miss its mother. "But, if I had not brought it home, the wicked dog would have killed it," Shankaran argued. "And how can I find its mother? The baby was alone when I found it."

Shankaran won the battle in the end and was allowed to keep the squirrel. He took great care of his pet. He found a box and made holes on it on three sides. He then lined it with some straw. After pleading with his grandmother for a piece of cloth, he managed to get a soft muslin to cover the straw. That was to be the squirrel's home. From that day onwards, they were the best of friends! They played about under the trees and in the backyard, and Shankaran would always find something for it to eat. Grandmother herself became fond of the little creature and often gave it milk in a bowl. But towards evening, it would scuttle back to Shankaran to be pampered by him.

It was in such congenial and loving atmosphere that Shankaran spent the early years of his life. And these years seemed to have flown past on wings. Soon it was time for Shankaran to leave this happy world of wonder and enjoyment, and enter a life more rigid, more taxing, but with a lot of freedom.

It was time for Shankaran to join a high school. Though there were facilities for further education in Kayamkulam, it would have to be in the vernacular language whereas, in a bigger town, there was a good high school where the medium of instruction was English. But Shankaran had an attack of typhoid and he did not recover from it for more than three months. He lost one year in studies. However, he attended a preparatory class in Kayamkulam before arrangements were made to send him to the English Medium High School at Mavelikara.

Mavelikara is almost six miles away from Kayamkulam. And that meant, Shankaran had to leave behind the sheltered life he had so far enjoyed and step out of the protection of his grand-uncle, grandmother, and uncle.

Six miles seemed a long distance to a young boy, and Shankaran tried his best to make scenes and convince his grandmother that he should not be sent away. Grandmother herself had been shedding silent tears from the moment the decision was taken to send her little Shankaran to Mavelikara. But who could face the wrath of his

disciplinarian grand-uncle?

"What! Not going to high school? Do you want to remain an illiterate fool?" he shouted at Shankaran, who was hiding behind the folds of his grandmother's clothes. It was no use, thought Shankaran. Grand-uncle's decision was final. He went about bidding good-bye to all his friends and the workers in the fields, and saying a silent farewell to all his secret hiding places and favourite haunts. He was going to miss everything. Especially his dear grandmother's shelter.

But the future awaited him. And, one fine day, with his bags packed and his hand held firmly by Grand-uncle, Shankaran was led to the waiting cart, for the long journey to a new way of life.

# 3

THE high school years at Mavelikara helped Shankaran to develop his personality. He was totally cut off from the three persons who were responsible for moulding his life till then. It, therefore, took him some time to adjust to his new surroundings. The family with whom he stayed were simple folks and non-interfering. They left Shankaran to himself, only asking him occasionally if he needed anything. Shankaran's life mostly revolved round his new school.

It was an English medium school. It was a much bigger school than the one in his home town, and had many more students. Shankaran found an old classmate studying with him in the new school and, therefore, he did not feel so lost and lonely. They kept company with each other and generally moved about together. A little wary of the senior boys, they tried to keep themselves out of their way. Some of them were bullies, but the rest were well-behaved and friendly, and even offered help to the newcomers.

The teachers, too, were good, and Shankaran now enjoyed his studies. His eagerness to gain knowledge made him attentive in the class, and the teachers were quite impressed with the intelligent questions he sometimes asked them. He was soon rated as one of the best students in his class.

He often missed his home and his old style of life, but accepted the new pattern of life bravely and with confidence. His grand-uncle was also satisfied and happy with the frequent reports he had about Shankaran from various people who happened to visit Mavelikara. And he himself made it a point to find out how Shankaran fared in school, whenever he went to Mavelikara. Shankaran felt that Grand-uncle had mellowed down quite a bit. He would take Shankaran to the market and buy him gifts and even give him some pocket-money.

Shankaran treasured these moments, especially because he could never have imagined that his grand-uncle had another side to his hard nature.

In spite of the many additional subjects he had to study and the extra hours of work he had to put in even after returning from school, Shankaran's love for the outdoor did not diminish. Whenever he got an opportunity, he would gather his newfound friends and go for a swim to the river or the large ponds in and around the town. They discovered many interesting spots and hideouts, and Shankaran took the initiative to organize these outings. Kerala, with its tropical climate, has long, hot, sultry days. There was no better way to keep oneself cool than to take a dip in the cool waters of the river or the innumerable ponds around the place.

Shankaran had by now grown into a tall and lanky lad with a lot of strength, which was evident in his physical prowess. He was an able swimmer. He taught swimming to many of his friends, and they all enjoyed going far out into the water and racing with the swiftly-moving boats.

One day, Shankaran and his friends decided to go on a picnic to a place on the riverside, out of the town. They carried lunch packets. They also planned to pluck tender coconuts from the tall coconut trees growing all over the place. They kept a knife with them. All ready, they set off excitedly to enjoy their day. By the time they reached the spot, they were hot and sweating. Dumping their lunch packets and shirts under a tree, they all jumped into the water shouting and splashing away at each other and thoroughly enjoying themselves. A little downstream, on the opposite bank of the river, some women were washing clothes and filling their brass vessels with water.

One of the boys, who prided himself to be a good swimmer suggested, "Let's race up there and back."

"Yes, let us," agreed the others and they all stood in a line. On the word 'go', they set off with long strokes towards the opposite side. The water was calm and it made their swimming easy. The young boys were full of energy.

They were six in all. They had swum right across the river at a close gap of a couple of feet from each other. The rule of the race for them was not to halt at the other end, but to swim back to the starting point at once. Shankaran was in the lead on the way

back. Two of his friends were equally good swimmers, but they did not have the stamina required for such a long race. But they swam with all their might. Even the women stood up to watch the enthusiastic young lads.

Shankaran was the first to return, shortly followed by the rest of them. First, second, third, fourth, fifth. But where was the sixth? He could not be so far behind; he wasn't even half-way across the river! And then Shankaran spotted him—quite far out, frantically waving his hands in the air and ducking into the water every now and then. "It is Kuttappan, and he seems to be in trouble," said Shankaran. He did not waste a moment. He dived back into the water and swam with all his might towards his helpless friend. In a short while, he reached him. "I'm drowning! And I've cramps on my left leg. Shankaran, please save me!" the poor fellow gasped.

"You just keep your mind relaxed and do as I say. Don't panic, Kuttappan. I'll help you," Shankaran assured him. Like an expert coach, he kept giving instructions and encouragement, and literally dragged Kuttappan to safety. By the time their feet touched ground, they were both panting for breath. Their anxious companions waded into the river and assisted Shankaran on the last lap. They then massaged both of them till they got back their strength.

Shankaran was the hero of the day. Kuttappan was quite shaken out of his wits. But they soon forgot the unfortunate incident and spent the rest of the day very happy, carefree and relaxed. They took turns in climbing coconut trees. They shared their lunch and enjoyed the tender coconuts. By evening, they were back home.

Kuttappan, however, could not forget the day so easily. Whenever he got a chance, he would recount how but for Shankaran, he probably would have been drowned. All the senior boys in the school now saw him in a new light. They held him in high esteem as he was not at all vain. They began asking him to join them in their game of football after school hours. And to their joy and surprise, they found Shankaran an asset to whichever team he was playing for.

Once, while he was in his second year of High School, an incident made him not only detest football, but give up playing it altogether. He had gone to spend a few days with one of his uncles. He became friendly with the boys of that place, and joined them in a game of football. They were all quite senior to him and played the game systematically with properly fixed goal posts at the two ends of the

field. The posts were two long poles dug into the ground. Shankaran was helping to dig and fix the goal post on the ground. In the process, one of the poles slipped on to his right toe, instead of the ground. Its sharp edge tore off the toe nail and went deep inside the flesh. The wound turned septic and he had to be hospitalized. Shankaran was in agony for more than a fortnight. To this day, the toe nail reminds him of the unfortunate incident that made him give up football forever!

The boat race was an event that the young and old alike in Mavelikara, always looked forward to. During the monsoon, when rains lashed out incessantly and the river level rose to seven or eight feet, the school would declare a holiday. Ten to twelve boats, sometimes even fifteen or twenty boats, were hired for the race. These long rowing boats could carry twenty to twenty-five people.

Shankaran was also an enthusiastic participant in this race. The race would begin with a lot of cheering and shouting, and the participants were cheered all along as they rowed away downstream. And when the race ended, there would be yet another task of guiding the boats to the banks of the river, as there was always a possibility of the boats sinking because of their weight.

On one such occasion, as Shankaran and his friends rowed enthusiastically, one of the participants, who was also a teacher in their school, stood up in the boat to goad his boys to row faster. But he lost his balance and fell into the river. The other young rowers had a good laugh at him but stopped short when they saw him flinging his arms in the air and struggling in the water. Apparently, their teacher did not know how to swim! Their laughter turned into cries for help and some strong swimmers dived into the fast flowing river to save the poor man. Shankaran was one of them. They all swam against the strong current trying in vain to reach the struggling man.

In the meanwhile, word had gone round and those standing along the banks waited anxiously for further news. The headmaster of their school was most worried. He had heard the hue and cry and had come hurriedly to the river bank. Not only the teacher, but the lives of his boys were also at stake. Suddenly, there was an outburst of joy from the farther end of the river bank. The teacher had been dragged to safety.

As the triumphant procession came towards him, the headmaster



*With a friend in Geneva—1938*

on the train  
18-9-3.  
Dear Senator,  
Your card came  
the 9th and was  
in had hand and  
contrary to fact.  
You will find many  
the first report  
of your committee  
containing all  
your and my  
part. But if they  
do not speak

consequently & make  
for the visitant systems.  
I am with the  
wise man in your  
profession, you may  
only sincerely  
trust that you have  
an accurate know  
ledge of them, & more  
and your kind  
ness be wished.  
With much thanks  
I remain ever truly  
Yours very  
John C. Calhoun

spotted Shankaran leading it. He ran forward and hugged him. "When I learnt that *you* were there, I was relieved," he exclaimed.

Shankaran always looked forward to going home during the long summer vacation—to run wild amongst his favourite haunts and recollect the old memories of his childhood. Though he had grown older now, to his grandmother he was still her little Shankaran, and she would chase him around the house, asking him what he would like to eat. And she saw to it that she cooked all his favourite dishes. What Shankaran loved most was jackfruit, which he would eat in any form—ripe from the tree, or cooked as a vegetable or as sweet 'payasam'. And if the fruit he spotted on a tree was still raw, he would lose his patience and poke it with sticks which, according to him, is the right method to hasten its ripening! Even today, despite the eighty winters he has passed by, he enjoys this fruit with the same relish.

He continued his interest in cooking and would often wander into the kitchen checking on the ingredients that went into the delicious meals he ate. Sometimes, he would cook a whole meal, all by himself! And even Grand-uncle had a good word to say.

Towards the latter half of his stay in Mavelikara, Shankaran moved into a lodge with his friends. At first they kept a cook, but he remained with them only for a short while.

None of the young lads could tolerate petty thefts and lies. They were all sharing the expenses from the little pocket-money that they got. And so, as and when the servants either ran away or were sent away, which happened quite often, it befell on them all to fend for themselves till they could find a substitute. And Shankaran would be the chief cook then! His adventurous nature, ready to face any challenge, led him on to going to the market and buying vegetables and other items needed for a meal and with confidence, setting about to cook the meal. He saw to it that his mates had their share of work also! The food turned out to be delicious and that would prompt Shankaran to try out different dishes. This pattern continued every time they waited for a new servant. It was a great accomplishment for a person not allowed to cook in his grandmother's house! His culinary expertise was to help Shankaran in the later years of his life.

Four years in high school rolled by quite fast, with happy memories, for the young boy who had by now grown into a tall, hand-

some young man. Though he often played pranks and was caught drawing sketches of people he knew at school or outside, he did well in his examinations and his teachers were impressed by him.

Now there was no looking back for Shankaran. He did not feel as nostalgic about his home in Kayamkulam, as when he had left it. He had the future ahead of him. He decided to attend college in Trivandrum, the capital of the then Travancore State and of present day Kerala. And Shankaran was keen to study in a good college. As there were no colleges in Mavelikara, he wrote to Grand-uncle of his intention to go to Trivandrum. And Grand-uncle was indeed very happy at his decision. "So shall it be," he wrote back to Shankaran.

# 4

TRIVANDRUM is a beautiful city, with a five-mile broad coastline. The terrain is undulating, and the lush greenery is only broken by clean winding roads, the grand palaces of the former Maharajahs of Travancore, and temples famous for their architectural grandeur. Cleanliness is the characteristic of not only the countryside of Kerala but of its people. Wherever you go, you will come across men in spotless white dhotis (called *mundu*) and shirts, their hair oiled and neatly combed, briskly going about their chores.

The women are mostly dressed in white saris or their two-piece ‘*mundu*’ with a narrow border of some contrast colour, and a matching blouse. Their long hair, washed, oiled, and shining black, with a knot tied at the end, looks as lovely as their large, black eyes enlightened with ‘kohl’ or ‘kajal’. And Shankar is proud of this characteristic feature in the women of Kerala.

He vividly recalls the year 1925, when he was in Junior B.A. at the Maharajah’s College of Science in Trivandrum. That year, Gandhiji had visited Trivandrum. The National Movement had just begun to take shape. Gandhiji went across the country—to see and know the places and people of his country intimately. While in Trivandrum, Gandhiji met a cross-section of the citizens. He met the political leaders and party workers, and also spoke to the students of the Maharajah’s College where Shankaran was a student.

“The same evening, Gandhiji addressed a huge gathering of women,” Shankar recalls the incident. “He did not speak for a long time, but kept staring at the women. There was pin drop silence. And then he spoke. ‘I have fallen in love with the women of Kerala,’ he said. ‘I have been looking around for the last 10 minutes and have not spotted any colour. All of you are wearing white, and it is

spotlessly clean. I respect you and admire you.' Gandhiji himself was wearing only white."

On a normal day, the older men and women go to the temples after completing their early morning chores. The others go to their respective work or college or school. Whatever be their status or vocation in life, their common factor is their spotlessly clean appearance—and they wear only white!

And it is in this beautiful city of Trivandrum that Shankaran spent some of the best years of his life. His college years were full of carefree merriment—precious years that every man loaded with responsibilities later in life always cherishes. More than sixty years have passed by, but even today Shankar nostalgically recalls those five years of his college life with pride. One can very well imagine the handsome young man cycling to and from his college and the private lodge where he and a few of his student-friends stayed.

To own a bicycle was considered a luxury in those days, and Shankaran was the first amongst his friends to buy one. An uncle of his, who had gone away to Bombay to try his fortune, had settled down there. After completing his first year, Shankaran decided to visit this uncle. He went to Bombay unannounced, but was not denied a good time. It was an entertaining and enjoyable holiday. He went round the famous landmarks of Bombay, was fed well, and received many presents. "And in the end, he gave me a considerable amount of money before I started back for Trivandrum," recalls Shankar. "In those days, there was no direct train from Bombay to Trivandrum. One had to change at Madras. I spent a day in Madras, and bought myself the best cycle available!" he said proudly.

Shankaran studied at the Maharajah's College of Science. It was a majestic-looking building the Maharajah had specially constructed to serve as a college. His uncle in Bombay paid his fees and sent him an additional allowance. The amount was sufficient to meet his needs and a bit more!

Shankaran had many friends, and he enjoyed their company and was generous when it came to entertaining them. He became popular in his college in the very first year. His histrionic talents were noticed by some of the lecturers, when they chanced upon him amusing his class-fellows with his mimicry. Once while still in the first year, he had acted as the heroine in a play staged by the

hostel students. From then on, there was no play or activity in the college without Shankaran's participation in it.

He became a leader on such occasions, and even managed to cajole many of his shy and reserved colleagues to take part in the events. The spirit and enthusiasm with which he plunged into working out the minutest details of a function invariably resulted in it being a roaring success. In many plays Shankaran was given a major role. He also had to handle its organising side.

Though not very communicative, Shankaran had no inhibitions when he got on the stage. He excelled at whatever role he undertook, and his direction was always superb. One particular role was that of an old sweeper woman. With his front teeth blackened to show him toothless, and his crude mannerisms, he sent the audience roaring with laughter. After the play, some prominent citizens of Trivandrum and his own college Principal and admirers came back-stage to congratulate him.

Soon his was a household name in Trivandrum. He came to be popularly known as Illikulam Shankara Pillai. Illikulam was the name of his ancestral home. It was a tradition amongst the Hindus of Kerala to attach the name of the family 'tarwad'—joint family—to their own names.

His energy and drive in whatever he strove to do was inexhaustible. In 1924, a huge flood in northern Travancore made it necessary for every organisation, school, or college to undertake relief operations in the form of money, clothes, food and other necessities. The Maharajah's College also undertook the task of collecting money and material. The students were divided into different small groups and it was with a sense of competitive spirit that they went about the job. Shankara Pillai's group collected more than what all the other groups collected together. And so they were given a special mention during the college Assembly.

In his third year, he was elected Secretary of the Annual College Day Celebration. It was an interesting election campaign, and Shankara Pillai was chosen Secretary with a thumping majority. His zest to bring the name of the college to the fore now doubled and he organised several inter-collegiate competitions in plays, elocution and sports. The College Day celebration was a big affair, conducted in a very grand manner. A lot of money had to be collected and spent—and Shankara Pillai managed it splendidly.

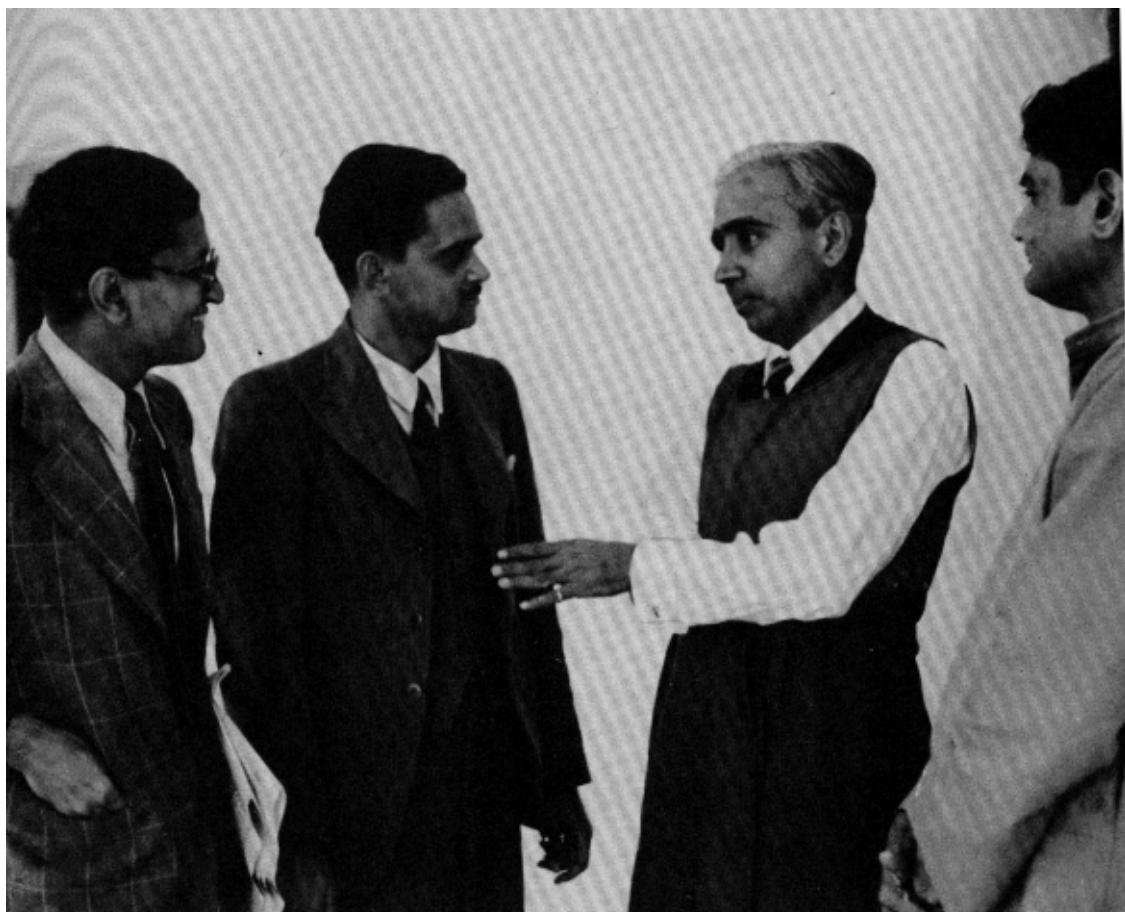
He was a keen tennis enthusiast and spent some time at the nets after college hours every day. He was also popular at the Scout Master's Training Camp.

Shankara Pillai was known for his sharp wit and the lecturers in the college feared it. He never spared them in the caricatures he drew on the posters whenever there was a function or a campaign. And these posters usually evoked a loud roar of laughter from the people when they came across them stuck on the walls. Some lecturers with a sense of humour would request Shankar Pillai to let them keep the posters as a memento. Nonetheless, no one complained about his studies or progress. He enthusiastically contributed sketches and articles to the college magazine. He graduated with a Science Degree in 1927.

Shankara Pillai had a flair for writing, and whoever read his articles wanted to read them again. "While in my last two years of college, some of my essays were often read out in the Assembly Hall," Shankar recalled. "But after they were read, the professor would crumple them up and throw them aside. And that used to hurt me. Of course, I knew why he did that," he said bashfully. "He was horrified at my spellings! That's why I did not attempt any writing for a very long time!"

Another favourite hobby of Shankara Pillai was his love for nature and his curiosity to see places and people. He fulfilled this desire during his holidays while still at college. He had his sturdy bicycle with him. He would put two sets of clothes into a knapsack and carry some money and set off with no definite plans in mind. His friends would often comment, "He will only come back when the travel bug leaves him." And Shankara Pillai would pedal away from town to town, making new acquaintances and renewing old ones. He would spend the night at their houses and set off early the next morning.

He had a knack of chatting with people while he rested at a temple or paused at the wayside. They were intrigued by his mode of travelling long distances and would invite him to their house for a snack or even dinner. And soon, as he ate and talked with them, the problem of finding a roof for the night would also get solved. Some took him for a prospective bridegroom for their daughters, while some older people of the house looked at him guardedly not trusting his weird way of travelling about aimlessly without any



*With his colleagues in 'The Hindustan Times'—1944*



work. Anyway, Shankaran never found any difficulty in finding a shelter for the night somewhere along the way. "I learnt a lot from such travelling," Shankar said. "It gave me an opportunity to see Travancore and its people—an insight into the depth and beauty of nature and its impact on the people and their customs and needs. For me, it was an education in itself."

Once, during his college days, he heard that his mother was unwell. He was worried and decided to go and see her at once. He took his cycle and went to the railway station, put it in the brakevan and boarded a train for Quilon. His mother's house was about 28 miles from Quilon. He spent the night at a friend's house in Quilon. The next morning, after a hot cup of coffee, he was off on his cycle, going at a steady speed to reach his ailing mother. When he rode into the compound of his mother's house, he found her sitting in the verandah all hale and hearty. He knew he had been misinformed, but was glad he could meet his mother! And it was a happy occasion for both.

Except for the first year that he spent in the college hostel, Shankara Pillai had moved into a private lodge. In a very short time, his room at the lodge turned into a den for many of his friends, where they studied together, fooled around, and sometimes even slept in improvised beds.

Shankara Pillai loved to have people around him—a passion that remained with him throughout his life. His warm-heartedness, generosity, and hospitality gained him many friends—some sincere, some selfish—but Shankara Pillai himself did not make any distinction between them. They all looked upon him as their guide and friend, and he never let them down. In his later years also, he went out of his way in helping his friends in need, and this quality remains with him even today.

Meanwhile, at the lodge, Shankara Pillai had won the hearts of his friends with his expert cooking. They just had to name the dish, and Shankara Pillai would prepare it with pleasure. The secret of his expertise lay in the experience he had at Mavelikara while he was in High School.

Shankara Pillai had graduated from the Maharajah's College of Science in 1927. In those days, the convocation used to be held in Madras. It was a moment of pride for Shankara Pillai to go to Madras to receive his Degree.

It was during these years of enjoyment and freedom in Trivandrum that Shankara Pillai met a young girl, ten years younger than he. Thankam was the daughter of an army officer and had been brought up under strict military-like discipline. During those days, society did not permit young boys and girls to meet openly and talk freely with one another. In the beginning, the only contact Shankara Pillai had with Thankam was when she either walked down the road to school or was returning home. And, of course, not a word was uttered between them!

Neither of them recall how and when they realised they were made for each other. "It just happened," Shankar said with a twinkle in his eye. It appears, one day, he secretly helped his friends see the young girl as she walked down from school—books in hand, her long hair tied at the end in a knot, with a small rose tucked in. They could not believe their eyes. "But she is only a little girl!" they exclaimed. She was only ten years old then.

"Yes, but I like her," Shankara Pillai replied, calm and composed.

"There is a very funny story about that period," Shankar once told his family. "A scandalous rumour spread all over Trivandrum that I was lost in love with a lady. One day, my principal, Prof. C.V. Chandrasekharan, summoned me and scolded me, saying I was one of the gems of the college and was spoiling my reputation by this affair. So, I went with him in his own car to show him the girl. We parked ourselves on the roadside and the Professor waited in suspense. I then pointed at the young girl walking down the road in the company of her school friends. The Professor had a good laugh. Years after we were married, he visited us in Delhi and stayed with us for a few days."

Shankara Pillai had some common friends who knew Thankam's elder brother well. Along with them, he would go to her house. There was no chance to talk to her, yet, it was a pleasure for him even to get just a glimpse of her, or listen to her singing or playing on the violin from a distant corner of the house. He tried to put on his best behaviour and was, therefore, accepted in Thankam's family without any reservation. Her brother and mother already knew about his inclination. Thankam's father gladly gave his consent for their marriage. But before that, he had to make a career for himself and stand on his own feet to be able to support himself and his wife. He had to take a decision about his future.

Once again he decided to seek help from his uncle in Bombay. He wasted no time and decided to go there to study law.

A young man of 25 years, Shankara Pillai left Trivandrum and all that he had known behind him, and journeyed to Bombay—even then a large metropolitan city, quite far away and different from his Kerala—to discover and find for himself what the future held for him.

He bade farewell to the land he was born and brought up in. Though he never went back to Kerala permanently, the deep-rooted love and warmth for the place and its people had a very special corner in Shankara Pillai's heart—the land that is proud to have produced this great personality whom people were henceforth to know more familiarly as Shankar.

**Vanesa Goodfellow (England)**

*He struck me as being a most gentle and wise man, who wished to impart his wisdom to all, in the nicest way possible. I remember him as a self-effacing man, who seemed to shun open publicity yet could communicate so well with children. I admire him immensely in his achievement of setting up the Children's Book Trust and promoting art and literature among children, not only in India but throughout the world.*

# 5

BOMBAY, in the year 1927, was a city throbbing with people from all walks of life and from all corners of the country—a city with the underlying currents of the pre-Independence movement creeping into the veins of all its citizens—nevertheless a beautiful city, standing majestically against the shores of the great Arabian Sea on the west coast of India.

Shankar, a first year student at the Law College, was now a more serious-minded student than the fun-loving youth of Trivandrum—once again under the vigilant eyes of an uncle who had high hopes of his nephew making a name in the world of Law.

Though Shankar took to studying Law seriously, he never enjoyed what he was doing. He attended classes regularly. And yet, he felt restless. It was not because he was missing his own folks back in Kerala, or his sweetheart Thankam. Perhaps he felt that what he was doing in Bombay was not what he really wanted. He was not aware of it yet, but the National Movement was drawing his attention. He was not emotionally involved in his studies. Though the classes were only from nine to ten in the morning, he lost interest altogether. He decided to get a job and find a footing in life. While still studying in his first year at Law, he got a job with the Bombay, Bengal and Central India (B.B. and C.I.) Railways. But he found it dull and, after three weeks, he quit the job. Before completing two years at the Law College, Shankar quit studies, too, much to the chagrin of his uncle.

In Shankar's own words, this is how he got his second job: "I used to read 'The Times of India'. One day, there was an advertisement. It said: 'Wanted a Stenographer, Box number such and such'. Below that, there was another advertisement, for a general clerk.

I applied for the second one, but by mistake put the box number of the first. A few days later, I was called for an interview by Mr. Narrottam Morarjee (the shipping magnate and founder of the Scindia Steamship Company). He asked me, ‘What is your speed?’ ‘What speed?’ I asked in return. ‘Your shorthand speed,’ he said. I told him I didn’t know any shorthand. ‘Do you know typing?’ he asked. ‘I have tried my hand,’ I replied. ‘Then, why did you apply for the job?’ he asked irritatedly. ‘I saw the advertisement. But I seem to have made a mistake,’ I said. ‘The advertisement is for a Stenographer,’ he said. ‘I’m sorry,’ I said and got up to go. ‘Sit down!’ he commanded. ‘What do you know? Are you interested in anything?’ ‘I’m a little bit of an artist!’ I replied. ‘Do you know anything about Scouting?’ he asked. I told him I was trained to be a Scout Master. That made all the difference, because he was the District Commissioner, Scouts, in Bombay, and wanted assistance in his Scouting work! So, he asked me, ‘All right, what salary do you want?’ I calculated my daily needs and said, ‘Rs 150.’ He said, ‘Graduates get only Rs 50.’ At the end, we compromised for Rs 100!”

Though it was a streak of good luck that had brought them together, neither the employer nor the employee regretted this chance fortune of knowing each other. In Shankar, Mr. Narrottam Morarjee found a competent Private Secretary, with a good presence of mind and self-initiative to clear all work on hand efficiently. And Shankar was treated as a member of his family.

Mr. Morarjee invited him to stay with him at his house on Peddar Road. There was a separate 3-room unit above the garage and Shankar was not deprived of his independence. It suited him fine. Shankar still recalls the simple but delicious Gujarati food he used to eat at Mr. Morarjee’s place. They were memorable years.

The work was not much, and Shankar once again felt restless. Deep within him was the urge to do something great. And this need to fulfil his creative urges made him change professions and places through the later years of his life.

While Shankar was working with Mr. Narrottam Morarjee, the political movement in the country had started gaining momentum. Secret conclaves were held, and many political leaders were taken in. It was the year 1929. Shankar was consciously aware of the state of his country. He felt the desire to express his feelings, and the method



*With Sir Stafford Cripps*



*Engrossed in drawing a cartoon—'Shankar's Weekly' office—1947*

he chose was cartooning. He never forgot his childhood passion for drawing cartoons and he thoroughly enjoyed making fun of the political situation. Now the freedom movement stimulated him to have a go at the imperialists who ruled India.

He was an active worker and his involvement could have led him to a good term in jail. While he was staying at Peddar Road, the Congress Bulletin was secretly printed in his room well past the hours of midnight. It was risky, but Shankar was a fighter for the right cause.

Mr. Morarjee died in a car accident in 1929. He had been a good and compassionate boss and Shankar missed working for him. He, however, continued to work with his son, Mr. Shanti Kumar, and daughter-in-law, Mrs. Sumati Morarjee. When they moved to a bungalow at Juhu Beach, Shankar also went with them. He stayed there for nearly seven months.

Mrs. Sumati Morarjee was an efficient and dynamic lady. She shared a lot of her husband's work and soon became an able administrator. She had watched Shankar's sincerity and efficiency at work and realized that he was not meant to remain a stenographer all his life. She called him and gave him a letter of introduction to the chief of the Archaeological Survey Department in Poona for a suitable job. Shankar went to Poona, but the person concerned had gone abroad and so he returned to Bombay and continued working for the Morarjees.

A time came when he decided he was adequately settled in life to get married. A man of great pride and integrity, he had waited till he could financially support himself and a wife. He had also earned enough money to meet the expenses of the wedding, as he felt he already owed a lot to his uncle and other relations.

He made one more attempt at getting a different kind of job, and that was when he went to Calcutta to meet some of the leading newspaper magnates there. While they appreciated his cartoons, they did not offer him any definite job. And so he returned to Bombay.

He wrote a letter to Thankam's father saying he would be reaching Trivandrum soon and preparations for his marriage with Thankam could begin. Thankam, who had patiently waited all these years for him to come and marry her, was the happiest person in the household.

On May 18, 1931, Shankar married Thankam, who had by now grown into a petite and charming young lady. It was a grand wedding.

In Kerala, the wedding is customarily held at the bride's house. The wedding pandal is decorated traditionally. Plantain trees in fruit are tied to the four pillars, topped with blossoms from coconut palms.

In the pandal are placed two low wooden platforms covered with a black cloth, over which a white cloth is spread. It is customary to have these two pieces of cloth at a Hindu wedding in Kerala. Two large brass oil lamps are placed in front of these platforms and five wicks lit in each of them. And in front of these lamps are placed two rice-measures called *para*. They are made of wood and decorated with an intricate design in brass. They are filled with paddy and covered with coconut flowers and jasmine garlands.

The large coconut thatched pandal overflows with people eagerly waiting for the bride to appear. And at the auspicious moment, the drums play loud and the women let out joyous cries (meant to ward off all evil) which sound like a combination of war cries and bugles playing. This marks the arrival of the bride. She is preceded by the girls of the house walking in a row, each carrying a small traditional lamp. The bride follows, resplendent in her off-white two-piece 'mundu', with just a small gold border along its edge. Simple jewelry and flowers in her hair are the only decorations. But the radiance of her face outshines all these details.

If one is not watchful, it is possible that you may attend the wedding but actually miss the ceremony! For, it hardly takes a little over a minute.

The waiting groom Shankar garlanded his bride Thankam, and she did the same. They then exchanged rings and the groom tied a gold chain round the bride's neck. On the chain was a *thali* or a pendant, which symbolizes a married lady of Kerala. The couple then bowed and took the blessings of the audience.

Thankam's family was sad that their youngest and most favourite member was leaving them—more so because she was going so far away. But her father was confident that Shankar would take good care of her. With the blessings of all their elders and well-wishers, the young couple set forth for Bombay, to share a partnership of

happy times, and to overcome all problems with a spirit of togetherness. And through all the years that followed, she has stood by him, a silent pillar of strength, always encouraging him in the various ventures and projects he undertook.

Back in Bombay, Shankar and his young bride rented a two-room accommodation at Kemp's Corner. She was shy, and also a stranger in that large city. But Shankar soon taught her to overcome her shyness. He took her out in the evenings after he returned from work and introduced her to some South Indian families staying in the same building. But Thankam never stirred out when he was not at home. After four months, Shankar found another flat in Chowpatty, a better locality nearer to the sea. They spent many happy months there. Shankar was quick in making new friends and in the morning they all formed a group and went out for long walks. Shankar also took turns in cooking meals.

Drawing cartoons had by now become a passion with him. When he felt that his cartoons were good, he decided to get them published. He began sending them to prominent newspapers, like 'The Bombay Chronicle' and 'The Free Press Journal'. If not all of them, some at least got published and were appreciated by the readers. But it was not easy to run around, handing his cartoons to various newspapers, while he did a full time job with the Morarjees. So, Shankar would hand them over to someone who worked in "Free Press Journal" and lived in the same building where he lived. He delivered them to the various newspapers and kept a small amount for his services. Shankar was paid just two or three rupees for a cartoon, and he had to share even that amount!

Many bigwigs in the newspaper world began to look keenly at Shankar's cartoons. One of them was Mr. B.G. Horniman, the Editor of 'The Bombay Chronicle'. Though a Britisher, his thoughts were anti-government. Very soon Mr. Horniman started his own paper, the 'Weekly Herald', and he invited Shankar and asked him if he would draw for the front page of his paper. Shankar agreed. He now drew for three newspapers, and the public began to talk about his cartoons and even got excited about them. What he had started as a hobby became a source of income and also gave him a sense of deep satisfaction.

Mr. Pothen Joseph, who was a close friend of Shankar in Bombay and had made a name as a great journalist, had joined

'The Hindustan Times' in Delhi, as its Editor. He had seen in Shankar the making of a very good cartoonist.

One particular cartoon Shankar had drawn on the dissolution of the Second Round Table Conference in England and the formation of the Third Round Table Conference, to which Gandhiji was also invited, impressed Mr. Pothen Joseph immensely. The caption read: "Police dispersed the crowd with the minimum force". And the cartoon depicted the Indian delegation headed by Gandhiji as the crowd, Sir Samuel Hoare as a Policeman, and Sir Winston Churchill as a Police Superintendent. The cartoon created a sensation amongst the readers also. One day, while travelling in a bus, Mr. Pothen Joseph spotted Shankar walking on the footpath. He jumped out of the running bus and warmly hugged Shankar. And the next thing was to ask him to join his newspaper in Delhi as the staff cartoonist! Shankar was quite taken aback.

Mr. Pothen Joseph persuaded the management to take Shankar as the staff cartoonist. The manager of 'The Hindustan Times' went to meet Shankar in Bombay. He first convinced Shankar why he should shift to Delhi and later negotiated his salary with him. Though he was offered much less than what he was making in Bombay at that time, Shankar thought it was a prestigious offer and accepted the position of Staff Cartoonist of 'The Hindustan Times' in Delhi. Delhi being the capital of India, the centre of the British Raj was the hub of the political movement in India. It was a challenge for him. He knew that he might have to face disappointments, even suffer failures. But he was undeterred. In his heart of hearts, he felt he had taken the right decision.

When he told his wife that he had accepted a job in Delhi, she was not surprised. She had full faith in whatever decision he took. It was her firm belief that he knew what was best for both of them. Shankar resigned his job towards the end of October of 1932. The couple packed their belongings and bade farewell to their friends and the city of Bombay that had given them many memorable moments.

### **Carola Durnhofer (Argentina)**

*When I met Mr. Shankar, I was surprised by his character. I realised he wanted to meet people of all the world, because it seemed he loved what he was doing. And he was successful. I learnt a lot about India, and I think most of the members did, too. I really would like to return some day. Your way of living, all your customs are very interesting, and there is a deep religious feeling in all your activities.*

*His way of dressing gave him a great personality. Though he was an important person, he was very kind and sympathetic with us. I felt as if I was in my own country because he was so kind to us.*

# 6

**S**HANKAR had now reached his final destination—Delhi. It was here that he found his creative abilities most active, soaring to great heights—the city where his capacity to create and struggle feverishly to reach his goal came to the notice of many prominent figures—be they politicians, educationists, friends, or even silent foes! From those early years of his life, Shankar, with his unbounded energy and foresight, generated quick results in whatever he started doing and as he went along, he gathered a band of active and eager friends who stood by him and worked with him fervently to make his dreams come true.

Though an extraordinary dreamer, Shankar never lost his sense of reality, and he succeeded in making almost all his dreams and ambitions come true. Shankar's characteristic strength lay in his boldness. And all that he accomplished was the result of his unceasing efforts and his will to undergo any amount of hardship and labour, physical or otherwise. Qualities that brought him honour and fame in the years to come, and profound admiration from thousands of people, young and old, not only in India but across the seven seas. Qualities that gave him a sense of satisfaction of the fulfilment of his dreams, but at the same time did not change his humble, lovable temperament—always welcoming everyone with his usual hearty smile, his face reflecting all the affection and joy of the world!

Shankar and his young wife came to Delhi in 1932 and took some time to get adjusted to the new place. They rented a small flat near Subzimandi, in Old Delhi, which was near to 'The Hindustan Times' office. They had brought a small boy from Bombay to help in cooking and other chores. They were total strangers to

this city. Thankam was quite afraid of the strong-looking people of the north, harmless though they might have been. She never stirred out of the house while Shankar was away at work, and waited till evening came when, together, they would go to the market for their daily needs. They did quite a bit of sightseeing too—all the historic monuments of the eras gone by, the huge buildings of the colonial Raj, the beautiful gardens, and the crowded, colourful streets of Chandni Chowk.

Shankar made friends fast. Among them was Mr. Edatata Narayanan, who was the Assistant Editor of 'The Hindustan Times' and Mr. Shyam Lal, its Sub-Editor. Mr. Narayanan later established the 'Link' and the 'Patriot'.

Shankar had bought a bicycle to go to work. Every day, he pedalled to the office and back, observing as he went past the faces and mannerisms of the people he came across. Watching people had become his favourite pastime. His work at 'The Hindustan Times' was rather light. He had to draw just one cartoon a day, and within a few weeks it had become mere child's play for him. He would finish drawing his cartoon in about an hour and thereafter was free for the day!

These hours of freedom were something Shankar eagerly looked forward to every day. After submitting the cartoon to the Editor, he would escape on his bicycle straight to Connaught Place. He would park the vehicle at a cycle stand and then set off walking round the full circle, oblivious of the people bumping into him, but keenly observing individuals and characters that interested him. These sights triggered off a series of ideas in Shankar's mind when he made fun of the social situations of the day in his cartoons. For years to come, Shankar was a familiar figure in the verandahs of Connaught Place where most of the shopkeepers knew him by sight.

On the political front, Shankar's cartoons became increasingly popular with both Indians and the British. The British Viceroys, like Lord Willingdon, Lord Linlithgow and Lord Wavell, were often the targets of his lampooning, but they enjoyed his cartoons thoroughly. There is one particular incident which Shankar enjoys quipping about. It was the time when Lord Willingdon was the Viceroy and Shankar had drawn a cartoon of him on the front page of 'The Hindustan Times'. He had already done many other

cartoons of Lord Willingdon. That day, and it was just four months after he had joined 'The Hindustan Times', Shankar received a message from the Viceroy's office saying that Lord Willingdon wished to see him. Shankar was at his wit's end. What had he done to receive these summons? He was unable to think straight. He became nervous. He would surely lose his job.

The appointment was fixed for the following morning at 10. Shankar could hardly get a wink of sleep that night. As the moment approached, he gulped three cups of hot tea and set off for the Viceroy's residence. He was ushered in immediately by the ADC. The Viceroy ran forward and embraced Shankar. "I enjoy your cartoons, my boy!" he said aloud, as he thumped him on his back. Shankar could not utter a word. It was an anti-climax!

Lord Willingdon then asked him a few questions and made him sit by his side. "There's someone else who wants to meet you," he said. "Lady Willingdon." Soon Lady Willingdon walked in and shook hands with Shankar. "I'm very glad to meet you, Mr. Shankar, but I've one complaint against you. I don't like your drawing my husband's nose so long."

Shankar explained to her: "In drawing the faces of people, I look out for some peculiarity somewhere on the person's face. I feel His Excellency's nose has some peculiarity, and so I've drawn it long. Even if I draw just the nose, people will know it's Lord Willingdon."

Another cartoon Shankar had drawn was of Lord Willingdon leading Gandhiji to the jail, his hands tied with a thread. It was captioned: "Taking up the thread where it was left."

That was Shankar's first encounter with the British authority. Lord Linlithgow and Lord Wavell, too, often appreciated his cartoons. Shankar chuckles: "They were sometimes atrocious and wicked cartoons, but they all loved them." On another occasion, Shankar drew a cartoon of Lord Linlithgow, depicting him as Goddess Bhadrakali standing over a burning body in the graveyard. After it came out in print in the morning newspaper, Shankar himself felt that he should not have drawn it. At 11 o'clock, there was a telephone call from the Viceroy's Military Secretary. Shankar thought that it was the end of his cartooning career, and his hands trembled as he waited for Lord Linlithgow to come on the line. What the Viceroy told him really stumped him. "Shankar, my boy, you've

drawn a wonderful cartoon. I want you to send me the original immediately.” Shankar recalls the cartoon even today and quips: “Had it been any one of our leaders today, he would have collapsed!”

Right from his early days at ‘The Hindustan Times’, Shankar never spared any of the Indian leaders either. Sir Mohammed Usman, a Member of the Viceroy’s Executive Council, had a portly figure. Shankar once drew him as a huge balloon perched on the Government House, with the heading “Defence of India”. When the Member saw the cartoon, he was furious. He is reported to have charged down angrily to the Viceroy’s office, shouting, “This fellow must be arrested!” But the Viceroy knew what was best.

Another story of Shankar’s ‘naughty’ cartoons is that of Sir Jwala Prasad Srivastava. He, too, was a Member of the Viceroy’s Executive Council. Shankar wanted to meet him just as he met other leaders to observe their expressions and mannerisms. He went to his residence twice after fixing an appointment, but both times, Sir J.P. did not see him. Shankar was annoyed. When, for the third time also Shankar was made to wait, he told the Member’s Secretary that he didn’t have any more time to spare, and began walking away. The Secretary in a trice called him back. “The Hon’ble Member is now ready to see you.” Shankar was taken to his room and there, he found the Member, fully undressed and having a massage! “I hope you don’t mind,” he said. “I do mind,” replied Shankar. The next day, Shankar drew a cartoon of Sir J.P. Srivastava in his birthday suit, with the caption, “I am fully clothed”. In the months to follow, he drew over fifty cartoons of Sir J.P. Srivastava, all in his birthday suit. Sir J.P. was furious. He summoned Mr. Pothen Joseph, who was then posted in Madras, at his own expense to prevail upon Shankar to stop drawing him in such a manner. Even his strong protests to the Viceroy did not help matters. Shankar stopped only when he wanted to.

Neither the pompous Viceroys, nor the grim Hon’ble Members of the Executive Council could hit back at Shankar, lest they appeared in reality even more ridiculous than what Shankar’s cartoons made them. According to Edatata Narayanan, a friend of Shankar and also the Editor of the newspaper ‘Patriot’, “Shankar achieved that supreme ease of characterization which has ever since marked his work from those of his peers like Low or Strube. Shankar’s cartoons rarely have the generalized man. His individuals

are real individuals, instantly recognizable in spite of the most adventurous exaggeration; they act and behave like peculiar individuals, and not like abstractions. As the great ones of India and the world begin to perform under his pencil and brush, they seem to shed their inhibitions but never leap out of character."

Mr. M. Chalapati Rau, a close associate and friend of Shankar to his last day, fondly spoke of him in these words: "Some of Shankar's best cartoons were done during the British regime. His victims were his greatest admirers; and among them were the Viceroys, not to speak of their wives. I could see the warmth with which he was received in the corridors of power. He does not require criticism—he is the greatest possible self-critic." Mr. Rau sat back nostalgically for a while and continued: "I have seen him draw so many cartoons under my eye for years but, while it is usual to talk now of this cartoonist's draftsmanship or that cartoonist's wit, there is no other cartoonist in this wide world who can reduce even the most complex problem to a simple, down-to-earth reaction, or put so much expressiveness in the faces of the figures, as Shankar does."

The years he spent in 'The Hindustan Times' seemed to fly, and Shankar's cartoons were eagerly awaited by many admirers. It was the first thing one took up with the morning cup of tea. The circulation of the paper increased day by day.

It was the year 1939. Gandhiji was at Wardha. Shankar had gone there to meet the great leader. Gandhiji at once called him in and asked him, "Answer me honestly, Shankar. Did you make 'The Hindustan Times' famous or did 'The Hindustan Times' make you famous?" Shankar only smiled in reply. His cartoons had a tremendous impact on the Indian thinking. Though he drew with such ease and finesse, Shankar had to put in a lot of homework.

His morning began early. He was up at 5 o'clock. A cup of tea, followed by a good long bath that would make him alert for the day. He would go through the newspapers and clip out the news items that interested him or gave him the inspiration to draw a cartoon. Some days, he would cycle down to the Legislative Assembly, meet the members of the Viceroy's Executive Council, and leading Members of the Assembly. Sometimes, he would merely watch and observe them all silently. Back in the office, he would take a look at the newspaper clippings, recall what he had seen and

heard in the Assembly, and settle down to work.

Shankar himself was the best judge of his work. Sometimes, even the Editor would see the cartoon only after it was printed in the paper. If something about the cartoon made him uneasy, Shankar would promptly go back, pick up his brush and make the changes with a deft touch. The most remarkable quality of Shankar reflected in his cartoons was his integrity. Though he ridiculed people and mocked at the way the State functioned, he never stooped to being vindictive or malicious towards anyone.

While he ran around meeting Assembly Members, the British community, as well as prominent Indian citizens, Shankar also took to photography. He would push off with his camera and capture them in their various moods. Photography, which began initially as a form of reference for his cartoons, to get the exact features of the person's face, later developed into a serious hobby. He made good use of his camera at home, as well as outdoors. A loaded camera was his constant companion.

Yet, it was not all work and no play for Shankar. He had his young wife and her household demands to attend to. She, in turn, had to look after his needs and those of his many friends and acquaintances, who knew they would never be turned away from their door. To them she was 'Chechi' or 'Chetathi', which means elder sister. Just as during his college days and even today, he would have people around him and invite them home for a meal, without giving adequate notice to his wife! But she was happy and quite used to her husband's ways and such typical characteristics of his would never worry her. Always keeping a smiling face, she went about preparing a meal and sometimes even arranging for an extra bed if someone were to decide to stay overnight.

While they were still in their Subzimandi flat, their first child, a daughter, was born. At the time of her birth, Shankar himself was in hospital, critically ill with typhoid. He lay unconscious and was, therefore, not aware of his daughter's birth for three days. It was Mr. Pothen Joseph and his other colleagues from 'The Hindustan Times', who took care of him during these days. They took turns in staying with him in the hospital and kept a round-the-clock vigil. The worst was over in a fortnight, and Shankar was back home—overjoyed to see his wife and their newborn baby.

His illness and the birth of the baby brought a sudden change in

*Shankar's pattern of life. It took him some time to recover fully from his illness, but he had a zest for living and rejoined work almost at once. Back home, he had the novel excitement of playing with his little daughter and watching her grow. He would daily take her for long rides on the tram down Chandni Chowk. Those were his private moments of pleasure.*

In 1934, Shankar moved house to a locality called Gole Market. It was closer to the office of 'The Hindustan Times', which had by then shifted to Connaught Place. After two years, a son was born to the couple. With two small children to take care of, his wife had no spare time. Back from work, Shankar would take his children for a ride. Once they were away, his wife could complete all the half-done chores of the day. The two children looked forward to these outings with their father. Sometimes, a tonga ride was an added treat.

The years seemed to go by on wings, and Shankar's popularity as a cartoonist only increased. 'The Hindustan Times' was proud to have him on its staff and was afraid of losing him. In fact, one of the competitive newspapers at that time was keen to have him working for them with very attractive monetary conditions. But 'The Hindustan Times' management was aware of his worth. They negotiated with him to stay on and the minimum terms he stipulated was for them to grant him leave for a year, so that he could go to London and study art professionally. He was given all the facilities he needed, and there was absolutely no interference in his work. The management accepted his terms and sent him to London to study art.

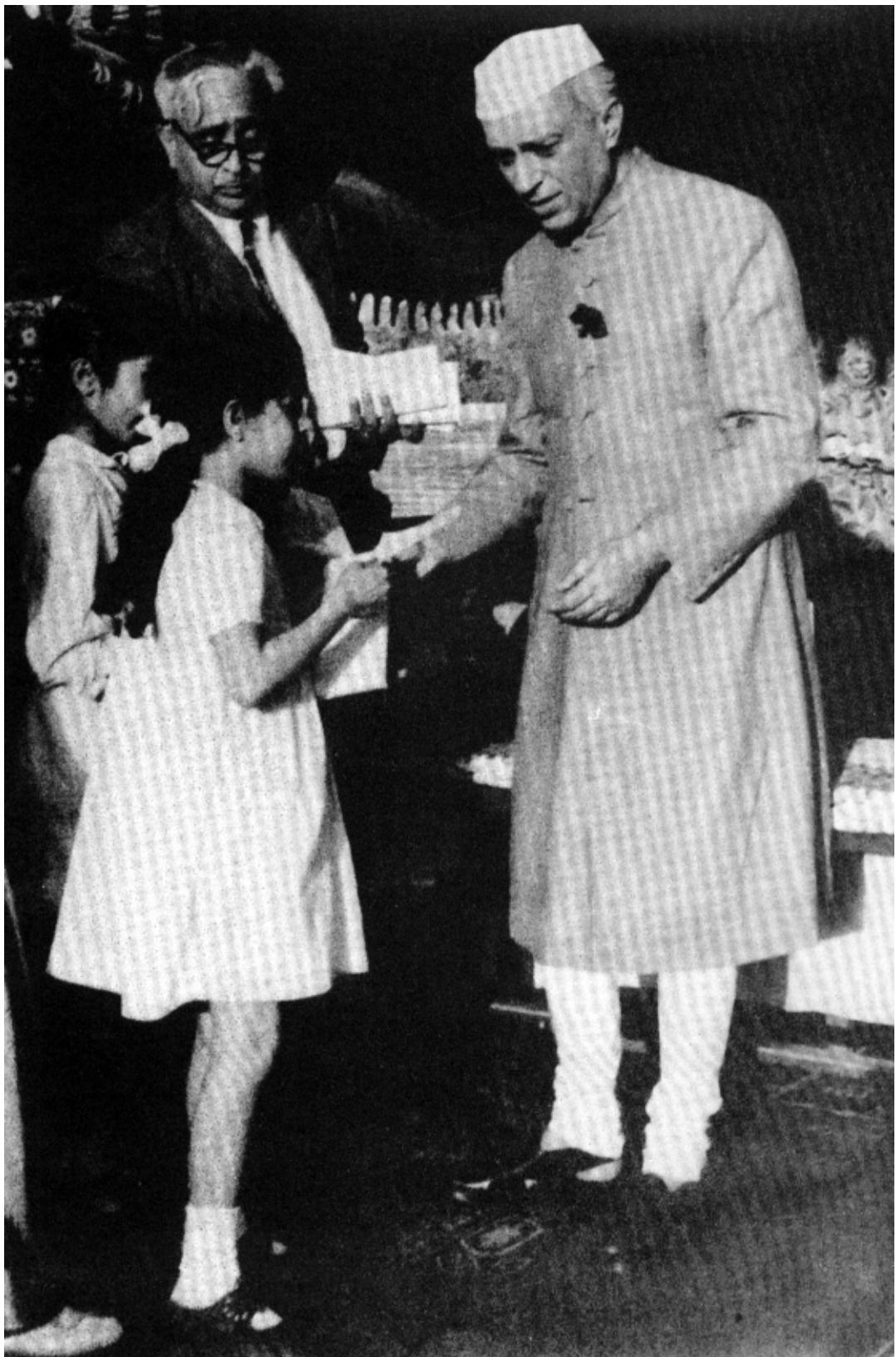
It was a privilege conferred on him. Shankar was the pioneer of political and social satire through the media of cartoons. And being a perfectionist, he felt the need to learn and specialize in the traditional technique of art, especially the drawing techniques. This is what he himself had to say: "I had taken to cartooning as a hobby. I had no professional training in the various styles and techniques used in cartooning. I felt that my work was incomplete with the lack of some training. And that is why I went to London to study art."

It was to be a long period of training, and Shankar decided to send away his wife and two small children to Kerala, to her parents' house, till he returned.

They vacated their flat in Delhi and he accompanied them to



*Not tall enough for the crowds to see—a gold medallist of the Theatre Festival, 1951—  
Madhavi Mudgil*



Trivandrum. It was a happy moment for all of them—they were going to Kerala after a long time, and it was good to be amidst their dear ones once again. His old friends and all those who had by now heard of him as a cartoonist of fame came to meet him. They never were tired of asking him about the city of Delhi, his work, his life-style. His father-in-law watched him and silently admired this young man who had whisked away his beloved daughter not so long ago !

Soon, it was time for Shankar to bid farewell to his friends and family. He was sad to leave his wife and two children behind. But he was going to broaden his horizons of knowledge. In May 1938, he sailed from Bombay, to spend a little over a year in London.

### **Foong Veen Chee (Malaysia)**

*Mr. Shankar's approachable character and his good nature have made my stay in India a pleasant one. In fact, there was always a kind smile on his face that heightened the atmosphere wherever he went. He is the kind of man that people respect, love, and adore.*

LONDON, in the summer of '38, might have been warm and pleasant for the Londoners, but was quite cold and chilly for someone coming from the blazing heat of Delhi. A new place, new land, new people—quite unlike the familiar, dark-skinned faces back home. Cold looks, sometimes just indifference—that was the general attitude from them towards a lonely Indian. But Shankar was not the one to lose heart or be put off by them. He had come to London with a purpose—to study art.

During his fourteen months stay in London, Shankar attended classes at three different Schools of Art. For four months, he learnt Commercial Art at Ryman's School of Art. Later, he joined the London Polytechnic, where he specialized in drawing human figures. He also enrolled as a student at St. Martin's School of Art, London.

Shankar managed to get a lodging in a house where some other Indians were also staying. "It was not a bad place. For two-and-a-half pounds a week, I had a big room with a kitchenette which also had a gas burner. It cost me half-a-shilling for a hot water bath," Shankar said, as he sat reminiscing about the days he spent in London. Shankar's routine went like this: cooking an early breakfast on a small electric stove to save on the expense of ordering food from his landlady; and then catching a bus to the Art School. It was an extensive course, and he was expected to be at the school till late in the evening.

Initially, he had to learn the various forms of drawing and painting, including still life, sketching and painting, portrait-drawing, and outdoor sketches. It was a challenging but interesting experience for Shankar, and the time he spent at the school, he would be thoroughly lost in his work.

After dusk, he would return to his lodge, cook a small meal with some foodstuff he picked up on his way home, and retire early to bed. His salary, paid from India, was not enough to meet the high cost of living in London, especially in pre-War conditions. However, he had also been awarded a small scholarship by the Tata Group of companies, and so he was never short of money. A good recreation he enjoyed was the walk along the Thames—taking in the scenic beauty and the silhouettes of towers along the river, and observing people, their moods and their expressions, as they walked past. It was like walking around Connaught Place and seeing people's faces that he would later reproduce in his cartoons. It made him nostalgic and brought back memories of India, his family, his office, his friends—but he was a man of strong will and determination. He would go back to India only after he had completed his training.

While in London, it was difficult for Shankar to restrict himself to a solitary life. He made quite a few friends. One of them was Lesley Grimes, a cartoonist. Grimes remained a close friend of Shankar throughout his stay there. Amongst his other friends was Dr. V.K. Narayana Menon, well-known veena player (presently Chairman of the Sangeet Natak Akademi in Delhi). He was studying at Cambridge then, and used to visit London often. "Once we both organized a good party in my room," Shankar recalls reminiscently. The star attraction was the famous danseuse, Indrani Rehman, who had gone there with her mother, Ragini Devi. "She was a shy and timid girl, just eight years old, then," Shankar remembers. "She had accompanied her mother to the party. But when she began dancing, all her shyness vanished." Shankar had made many friends by then, and they all came to this party to relish the food cooked by him and to watch the young dancer. It was a successful party. There were several such occasions later.

Shankar often visited the "Vega" in London, an exclusive Swiss restaurant serving vegetarian cuisine and patronised by many important personalities. Even Pandit Nehru made it a point to visit this restaurant while in London. Sometimes Shankar would go to Veerasamy's restaurant at Piccadilly Circus. He also spent many evenings at various studios to practise sketching human figures.

Shankar always acted on the spur of the moment. And whatever he decided, he went ahead with it. Once, he decided to go to Geneva when Nehru was there on an official visit. He liked the city, and on



*Escorting Pandit Nehru and Miss Padmaja Naidu at a Prize Distribution function—1960*



the way back, he also made a halt in Paris. There he had an opportunity to sketch some famous models of those times, and he found it a rewarding experience.

He had a memorable encounter with David Low, the renowned cartoonist of London. Seeing his works and listening to his views on cartooning was an added vision to Shankar's learning.

Fourteen months went by in London, and it was time for Shankar to return home. With the good wishes of his friends and all the happy and vivid memories stored in his mind, he said good-bye to London. On his way back, he visited Paris once again and after brief stop-overs in Berlin, Vienna, and finally Rome, he took a ship for Bombay. Though he had felt lonely sometimes, the year spent in London was profitable. It had given new dimensions to his art of cartooning and also got him an insight into the international scene just preceding the War.

**Ambika Sengupta (New Delhi)**

*Here we are, all trying very hard to grow up and be done with it and here, too, is Shankar ‘Maman’ stuffing it all back into us. Factories growing out of moustaches, people wafting up like balloons, a benign rolling pin. Mares with make-up, bottles looking wise, cars wanting to be caressed—the landscape of a joyous mind. It is just a step away, a small one—if Shankar Maman is holding your hand, that is. Ah! But you forget the phone’s ringing.*

**I**T was good to be back home! Back in his country, with his people, his family. Shankar had missed them immensely, though he had carefully avoided mentioning anything about it in his letters, lest his wife worried about him. It was more than a year since he had left them, and a year was quite a long time.

After disembarking at Bombay, Shankar went straight to Trivandrum to collect his family. It was a happy reunion for all of them. His children had grown up in one year. He would have very much loved to stay in Kerala for some time before getting back to Delhi, but he was eagerly awaited at 'The Hindustan Times'. And so, along with his wife and children, he returned to Delhi in July 1939.

The readers of 'The Hindustan Times' were glad to see the familiar cartoons of Shankar once again. They had missed them and many of them had written letters demanding the resumption of 'Shankar's cartoons', without knowing that he had been sent abroad by the paper to get further training in art.

Shankar now took up residence in Babar Lane in the more centrally-located Bengali Market. He was to spend the next twenty years there, in a spacious and comfortable house in Babar Lane. For Shankar, it was a house that had given him a lot of happiness and fulfilment of desires and ambitions. It was in this house that many Malayalees of Kerala came and lived with the Shankars whenever they visited Delhi—whether it be a relative, or a classmate, or an acquaintance, or someone with just a reference. Irrespective of whether he was a humble man or an influential person, if he was known to Shankar, he would stay at his house and receive the same kind of hospitality from him and his charming wife. It was 'open house' to all. Often newly-wed couples, seeking a career in Delhi,

would come and stay with them till they could find a job and accommodation. Shankar's wife would willingly become the guardian of the simple, ignorant young brides who would have left their homeland for this strange city.

In course of time, Shankar's own family grew. He had two sons and three daughters. Though the children were young and their mother never had a free moment, the visitors never ceased to come, and many stayed with them for long periods. Their homely house could accommodate them all! It had the same capacity as that of Shankar's large heart—there was a place for everyone in the little corners of the house as well as his heart!

In 1942, the Second World War had entered its third year. Delhi, being the capital and the centre of activities in India, was tense, and a feeling of insecurity had crept into the minds of the general public. Thousands of Indians were enlisted to fight the War for Britain. All barracks and army settlements were overflowing with American soldiers.

Shankar was torn between the safety of his family and his work. He decided to take them to Kerala. Packing up everything overnight, they set off for Trivandrum. Those days it was a four-day-long journey by train. Once he saw them settled safely in Trivandrum, Shankar's restless nature took him away to Bombay. He met his old friends and acquaintances and roamed about the familiar places. They brought back nostalgic memories of his younger days spent there. Within a month, he was back in Delhi. His life style did not change one bit, while his family was away. The same number of friends visited his home and were treated to good Kerala food. Shankar also made new friends—some American journalists posted in Delhi during the War days. They frequented his Babar Lane house and were treated to good feasts! Once the disturbed atmosphere had calmed down, he called his family back. And that was eight anxious months later!

Shankar's work continued with ease at 'The Hindustan Times', though the political situation in India had grown tense. Gandhiji had, through his Satyagraha movement, compelled imperialism to come out in its true angry and most cruel colours. A steady change came over the Indian people, on the platform and in the Press, from liberalism to a policy of active hostility towards British imperialism. Moving with the times, Shankar used his weapon of political cartoon-



*Sharing the Children's Art Number with Mrs. Galbraith, wife of the US Ambassador to India*



ing to ridicule the imperialists, though subtly. His work was not hindered by the gathering momentum for the nationalist cause— independence for India!

Shankar saw the steady growth of the national movement under the leadership of Gandhiji, and it was throbbing in his veins. He had also seen the harsh realities of the Hindu-Muslim agitation—the massacres and tortures of the days of Partition. Many of his friends were in prison. His own life was constantly in danger, because of the blunt and direct attacks reflected in his cartoons. His uncle from Bombay was staying with them. He was quite concerned about his safety and would not rest till he saw Shankar back home safe every day. Even if it was past midnight, he would retire only after Shankar had returned.

But the tides soon changed. India was free from the imperialist rule on August 15, 1947. Peace and tranquillity once again prevailed in the hearts of the Indian people.

Shankar's association with 'The Hindustan Times' lasted fourteen years. In these fourteen years, he had established the role of political cartoons as an essential feature in every important national daily. He quit 'The Hindustan Times' in 1946, following differences of opinion with the management. In collaboration with Mr. Dalmia, an Indian industrialist, he began a newspaper called 'The Indian News Chronicle'. But Shankar withdrew from the venture in just eleven months. He could not submit himself to the dictates of the proprietors in his cartooning. He wanted freedom, in his thoughts and in his work. And as Shankar would often remark, "It was a wise decision I took, because I could then start my own journal,— 'Shankar's Weekly'—though with hardly any capital."

The 'Shankar's Weekly' was inaugurated in 1948 by India's first Prime Minister, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru. Panditji had a weakness for cartoons himself, especially those drawn by Shankar. He liked to laugh at them and with them, more so because he was himself often the target of Shankar's pen and brush. In fact, while releasing the first issue of the Weekly, Panditji had told him, "Don't spare me, Shankar," and these words always remained in Shankar's mind. Nehru took a keen and personal interest in Shankar's work and, to his last days, he remained a good and sincere friend and guide to him.

With the launching of 'Shankar's Weekly', a novel adventure in Indian journalism, Shankar's horizons widened. He became more

stable and meticulous in his work. His cartoons could not afford any glaring contrast in thought process or argument. He had also to safeguard against any repetition of personalities. These and many other problems that an artist faces when he sets out to be also a newspaper editor and proprietor, all in one, were overcome by Shankar. Along with the problems thrown up by a challenging venture, 'Shankar's Weekly' to its founder became a missionary task, the kind of which no cartoonist in the world had taken upon himself.

Within a short time of publication of the Weekly, Shankar was recognized as the greatest cartoonist India had ever produced, not only by politicians, leaders, and intellectuals, but even by the layman, who would eagerly wait, week after week, for the new issue of the Weekly. 'Shankar's Weekly' soon became an institution!

Right from the cover page cartoon, to the editorial "Free Thinking", the pen-portrait of the "Man of the Week", to the centre-spread cartoons "March of Time", through the humorous and satirical articles on political and social situations in the country, the Weekly provided a variety of wit and humour to the millions of its fans, who laughed or smiled silently as they flipped through the pages. There were the "Mota Chotaji and the Chota Motaji". "Bada Saheb" and "Mem Saheb" were two particular characters who always drew the attention of the readers. They represented the sophisticated, false and artificial snobs of society, who were in abundance then, and one can find even today. Shankar gave these characters the unique face of a common, ordinary donkey and, according to him, "These two characters are the composite reflection of New Delhi's society." But, there was no malice in Shankar's mind. "It could be you, it could be me, it could be my wife," he said, as a naughty little smile flashed across his face while he talked about his Weekly.

Once Shankar was invited as a guest at the convocation of Lady Irwin College, a renowned women's college for Home Science in Delhi. As Shankar watched the confident young women walk up the stage to receive their diplomas, he had a bemused look on his face. Any close associate would have immediately recognized that look and predicted something from Shankar. And sure enough, the next morning's 'Hindustan Times' carried a most shocking cartoon that became the talk of the town.

But it did not end there. Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, Chairman of the All India Women's Conference, sent a strong objection. She herself was a freedom fighter in the national movement and now leading the fight for equality of women. She was so agitated by the cartoon that she at once wrote a letter to Devdas Gandhi, Editor of the 'Hindustan Times', to dismiss Shankar and to make him apologise through their newspaper. He had insulted a public institution and it should not be tolerated.

When no action was taken against Shankar, they approached Sarojini Naidu, affectionately addressed as "Akka" by all. Sarojini Naidu rang up Shankar and told him about the complaint against him, adding he better forget all about the incident. She, however, did not forget to reprimand him for not having invited her to a treat of 'iddli-sambar' for a long time!

But Rajkumari Amrit Kaur did not give up. She strongly felt that Shankar had committed an injustice towards all womenkind by ridiculing them in this manner. As a last resort, she went to Gandhiji with her complaint against Shankar. Gandhiji asked her to call Shankar. "I will hear you both together," he said.

The next day, Shankar and Rajkumari Amrit Kaur faced Gandhiji. First he asked Amrit Kaur "to chargesheet" Shankar. She poured out her grievances as vehemently as she could. He then asked Shankar to explain his action. Shankar calmly narrated the incident that had incited him to draw the particular cartoon. He said, "They all had blindly applied lipstick across their mouth, without caring what their complexion was—whether black, white, pink, yellow, brown—they all had applied a dark lipstick. I thought, perhaps this is what they had learnt in the three to four years in college. And I have only depicted that in my cartoon." He produced the cartoon before Gandhiji and continued! "The caption says, 'Thinking of opening a Lipstick Service Station at Connaught Place'. The ladies in the cartoon represent the graduates of Lady Irwin College and they are applying lipstick on the customers. I was quite irritated by what I saw on the stage, and had only projected my feelings," he said most innocently. Gandhiji heard him silently and in the end, he took one more look at the cartoon and burst out laughing. "You are acquitted, Shankar!" he said.

There were many national leaders who really liked to see themselves in the cartoons published in 'Shankar's Weekly'. Pandit

Jawaharlal Nehru had become an admirer of Shankar even in the 30's. A decade before India became free, Nehru had noted: "We are apt to grow pompous and self-centred, and it is good to have the veil of our conceit torn occasionally. I hope Shankar will long continue to enlighten and amuse us." Many years later, on another occasion, Pandit Nehru remarked: "I am always drawn towards 'Shankar's Weekly's' criticism, because I get an opportunity of self-analysis through it." It was a well-known fact that Nehru was fond of Shankar's cartoons. On Nehru's 60th birthday, his daughter, Indira Gandhi, visited the 'Shankar's Weekly' office and selected the originals of about twenty cartoons on Panditji, had them mounted, and gave them to her father as a birthday gift!

Dr. S. Radhakrishnan, well-known educationist, statesman and one-time President of India, once patted Shankar on the back and said, "Well done!" even though Shankar had tweaked his ears in his cartoon!

Gandhiji, too, enjoyed Shankar's cartoon immensely. But once he disagreed on a certain cartoon that Shankar had drawn for 'The Hindustan Times'. He at once wrote to him bluntly: "Dear Shankar, your cartoon on Mr. Jinnah was in bad taste and contrary to facts. You fulfil merely the first test of a cartoonist. Your cartoons are good as works of art. But if they do not speak accurately and do not joke without offending, you will not rise high in your profession. You must study the events. I know that you have an accurate knowledge of them. Your ridicule should never bite. You won't resent this note. Yours Bapu." Shankar did not at all resent the criticism. At a later date, when he met Gandhiji, they talked about the cartoon and cleared their misunderstanding with each other. Their difference was not in the comment, but in the timing of the cartoon.

'Shankar's Weekly' proved to be a training ground for many of the cartoonists of India. Among them are Samuel, Kutty, Ranga, Abu, O.V. Vijayan, Kerala Varma (Kevy), and later, Mickey Patel, Yesudasan, Prakash Ghosh, and many more. The affectionate tribute they paid to Shankar can be seen in the cartoon they presented to him on his 70th birthday!

The band of associates who worked for the Weekly included Mr. Chalapati Rau (later Editor of the 'National Herald'), Mr. Edatata Narayanan of the 'Patriot' and 'Link', Mr. P. Viswanath (later Editor of the 'Patriot'), and Mr. Poonen Abraham and Mr. C.P.

Ramachandran (both of 'The Hindustan Times'). Mrs. Amita Malik used to write on films and her reviews motivated the popularity of the movies! Mr. R.P. Nayar was responsible for bringing out the Weekly on the dot every Thursday morning, and that meant a lot of running around, securing articles from contributors, dashing off to the printing press, organising the distribution, and so on. And Shankar's cousin, "Baby" (Mr. N.M. Pillai), was on duty all 24 hours!

The Weekly office was located on the third floor of Odeon cinema in Connaught Place, and a winding staircase led to it. After working hours, the atmosphere in the office was hilarious. Two members on the staff had made the office their home as well. They found it easier to brush aside the books and files on the tables at night and convert them into beds! Johri was cook-cum-peon-cum-general factotum. They had either to suffer his culinary skills or go without food! After a late dinner, along with the other bachelor friends who dropped in, they would sing loudly in the most untuneful of notes till they fell asleep.

Facing Shankar in the morning was their major problem. An early riser, he would stray in and wake them up. He would then put on his dark blue apron and lock himself up in his room to draw the cartoons. Though fully engrossed in his work, he would puff away at his cigarettes endlessly. Two tins of 50 cigarettes a day was his normal quota! A man of strong will power, Shankar one fine day suddenly stopped smoking.

In a couple of hours, a few cartoons would be ready. Shankar would then summon the staff cartoonist to write the captions and sometimes to draw and fill the background. Lunch came around noon, sent by Mrs. Shankar. She always had a soft corner for the bohemian bachelors who worked there, and quite often she would send enough food for all.

"Shankar's Weekly" was a product of all these happy moments. Described as the 'Punch' of India, its readership was much more than what its circulation figures indicated. More than three fourths of its subscribers were public and college libraries.

Shankar's energy knew no bounds. The only day of rest he had was the day the Weekly was released. The very next day, he would start on his rounds again, collecting ideas and scoops for the next issue. Doggedly, he held on to his schedule and week after week,

devoted as much time as possible to his Weekly—a job that could ordinarily tax anyone's endurance. But Shankar never neglected his Weekly, and it flourished and evoked admiration and respect right through three decades, till its closure in 1975. By then, Shankar himself was nearing seventy-five. Although running the Weekly had been a difficult task, sometimes even backbreaking, he ran it without a break. But the work was too much for one man. The time had come when he found it a great strain to continue the journal. And the last gift of Shankar to his admirers was in the form of a large Souvenir volume which contained some of his best cartoons through the years and a selection of the best articles that had appeared in the Weekly. By way of farewell, Shankar said: “‘Shankar’s Weekly’ was a great little journal, though it had its shortcomings. We could not afford glossy paper or coloured cover pages. We could not pay competitive remuneration to the writers and cartoonists. Nevertheless, I think ‘Shankar’s Weekly’ introduced a new trend in both writing, and cartooning. It was meant to be an intellectual gad-fly, and I think that by and large it kept its character to the end.”

### **Simon Mullen (Australia)**

*Mr. Shankar is a very kind, considerate, and helpful man. His love for children was seen when he asked us to come from all parts of the world as one congregation ("family") to collect our medals in his home country. He is a "dictator for peace", inviting us all to go to his house and eat with him and his family, but I must stress that my greatest admiration of him is that he loves people, especially children.*

# 9

DURING this hectic period of his life, Shankar had a new germ of a thought bugging him off and on. It had started initially while he went round various art exhibitions in the capital. He found something basically lacking in the different works of art. He felt that there ought to be a better standard of art and it could only be attained if children were encouraged from a very young age to take interest in art.

Once after completing a cartoon, and leaning back in his arm-chair for a moment's relaxation, Shankar said, "Sometimes I get the feeling that I am through with this endless caricaturing of public personalities and the exposure of the follies and foibles of the high and mighty. Why not leave the grown-ups to themselves for a while? Let me try to know children. Children are beautiful, unspoilt, lovable. They deserve the best of everything."

This urge to do something for children that kept tugging at him now materialized in a form that spread wildly from the moment of its inception in 1948. It was one of those vague stirrings of a sensitive artist's mind, and culminated in a "Children's Competition in Drawing and Writing". Shankar wasted no more time. He did not wait for any big, high level meetings at government level or for any funds to launch his idea. The Competition was publicly announced, and entries started coming in from all parts of India—and in their hundreds! A jury was constituted with artists like Mr. B.C. Sanyal and Mr. K.S. Kulkarni, and writers like Mr. Chalapati Rau to help him. Shankar himself was actively involved in it! Every entry, whether written or painted, was scrutinized and those selected were awarded medals and prizes. The excitement of the several children receiving their prizes and the proud and happy faces of their parents

*An encouraging pat for a  
winner—Prime Minister  
Lal Bahadur Shastri*



*President Zakir Husain on a visit to the Children's Art Exhibition*





*With his close friend Mr. M. Chalapathi Rau*



were a pleasure to see. The Competition grew steadily in range and scope. Shankar was so excited with the response that he decided to bring out a special issue of the 'Shankar's Weekly' wholly for children, in December 1949. The prizewinning articles and paintings were published in this issue. The very first Children's Number was a tremendous success. Messages and letters of encouragement came from Pandit Nehru, Mr. C. Rajagopalachari, India's first Governor-General, Sardar Patel, and many more well-wishers, commending the effort and its result. And what was started as an impetus to Indian children to take interest in art spread like wildfire and literally forced Shankar to enlarge the competition from a national to an international level.

He felt that he should involve the children of other countries also in this happy event. With the help of the various embassies in the capital, and the Ministry of External Affairs, he now extended the competition to other countries. The result was very encouraging. The second Children's Number of 'Shankar's Weekly' thus had entries from 13 countries. The year was 1950. "The excitement was more for one man than anybody else, and that was Panditji!" Shankar proudly recalled. The Competition has now become a worldwide activity, bringing together children of almost all the countries of the world.

In this great and stupendous task, Shankar received all encouragement and support from Pandit Nehru. His own genuine love and deep feeling for children is sensitively reflected in the "letter" he addressed to children in the first Children's Number of 'Shankar's Weekly' in 1949: "If you were with me, I would love to talk to you about this beautiful world of ours, about flowers and trees, and birds and animals, and stars and mountains and glaciers, and all the other wonderful things that surround us in this world. We have all this beauty around us and yet we, who are grown-ups, often forget about it and lose ourselves in our arguments or our quarrels. We sit in our offices and imagine that we are doing very important work.

"I hope you will be more sensible and open your eyes and ears to this beauty and life that surrounds you. Can you recognize the flowers by their names, and the birds by their singing? How easy it is to make friends with them, and with everything in nature, if you go to them affectionately and with friendship. You must have read many fairy tales and stories of long ago. But the world itself is the

greatest fairy tale and story of adventure that was ever written. Only, we must have eyes to see and ears to hear, and a mind that opens out to the life and beauty of the world.”

Words of love and wisdom that every child of every generation should read and digest. And it was proved very soon that the encouragement Pandit Nehru gave Shankar in his project was well-deserved and fulfilling. From that year—1949—till a year before his death in 1964, unless he was out of town, Pandit Nehru never failed to attend the annual function to distribute prizes to the child artists and writers. These were always proud moments for Shankar.

“In 1955, the children’s art exhibition was formally opened by the President,” Shankar correctly recalls. “The welcome address was made by the then Canadian High Commissioner. He jokingly concluded his address by saying, ‘The name of Delhi must be changed to Shankaranagar!’ Such was the success of the Competition.”

“Next year—1956—the prize distribution was held at the National Stadium. A large number of people witnessed the show,” Shankar recalled with pride as he nostalgically talked of the past.

“Once, in 1957, President Rajendra Prasad was distributing the prizes. The venue was Regal Theatre,” Shankar continued. “And, then, all of a sudden, Panditji also arrived. He looked at the children and then settled down quietly in the first row to watch the whole function.” The next day, he called Shankar to his house and accusingly told him that he had not done the right thing in calling someone else to give away the prizes. “You should ask me first, and if I am not free, then you may call anybody else.” From then on, the first invitation always went to Panditji!

Soon after the inception of the Competition, Shankar had sent a copy of Children’s Number of the ‘Shankar’s Weekly’ to the ‘Times’, London, and was most pleased to receive an extensive and praiseworthy review of his effort. The article had pointed out that a children’s competition in art and writing had been launched, not by the U.S.A. or the U.K., but by someone in India. And that Indian with a vision was none else than Shankar.

At one stage, an Irish lady, Marion King, was so overwhelmed by the idea of this International Competition that she personally collected paintings and articles from children in Ireland and sent them to India as entries. They came in their hundreds, some of them drawn or written even on wall-paper!

The annual 'Children's Art Number', which recently had its 34th volume released, was Shankar's creation. He was quite fed up with the drab, lifeless and mechanical system of education, and this Art Number, entirely written and illustrated by children, he felt, would enhance the creative education of children all over India and abroad.

The first issue of the Art Number was an unqualified success with the children of India. Within its pages lay the creative expressions of the child's mind. By the time the second volume came out the next year, Shankar had become an international Pied Piper, who sought to take the little children of every country into a wonderful Never-Never Land of artistic communion!

Shankar was fascinated by the efforts of the thousands of children, of ages ranging from five to fifteen and belonging to all races and creeds, expressing their fancies and fantasies in their own imaginative, beautiful style. He wanted to share his excitement and joy of all this beauty with his fellow countrymen. So, he decided to hold exhibitions of the children's paintings in some of the major cities of India. The first such exhibition was held in Madras in 1951, followed by those held in Trivandrum and Bombay. He personally went along with his band of willing workers and, right from putting up the stands to bringing down the shutters of the exhibition, he was present there throughout—a silent figure, observing the reactions of the visitors to the exhibition.

The success of these exhibitions made Shankar realize the need to give more and more to children. And in whatever he did, he practised his self-made motto: "Only the best is good enough for children". He wanted to encourage them to come out in the open and show their inborn talent in all spheres of art, whether it be dance, music, or painting. In 1954, Shankar once again put his thought into action and organized a competition for children in dance, drama, and music. It was not just the participants who came in large numbers, but it drew large audiences also. People were taken by surprise to see nearly a hundred items spread over seven days.

Young talents mainly from Delhi and some from Gwalior, Kanpur, and Punjab performed on one platform, and there was a mingling of ideas and exchange of knowledge amongst the shy but enthusiastic participants. There were also several "International" entries from the children of the various diplomatic missions in

Delhi. The most captivating among them were the Indonesian children who presented a 'diya' dance.

It was all the single-handed effort of Shankar. He was present at the venue, even if it was past midnight. Of course, he was always assisted by sympathetic and willing friends! His wife often worried about his health, but his enthusiasm eclipsed any form of tiredness, and he carried on with zest till the end of the prize distribution on the final day. It was a proud and happy moment for the children who received their prizes from their beloved 'Chacha' Nehru. Charu Singhajit Singh and Madhavi Mudgil, two of the proud recipients of prizes, were then two little girls so tiny in size that Nehru had to lift them high up for the audience to see! And today, after nearly 30 years, these two charming young ladies are well-known dancers—the former having specialized in Manipuri and the latter in Kathak and Odissi. It was a Festival with a difference—cherished and nourished in memories, even today, by the young and old alike.

From that day, even though it was a new and difficult path, there was no turning back for Shankar. The success of the Painting Competitions and the Theatre Festival had given an extra fervour. "I must do something more for children. I cannot stop now." All along, though he continued "doing more and more for children", his work for the 'Shankar's Weekly' and cartooning went on unremittingly, for it was the journal that gave him his bread and butter. Never in the history of 'Shankar's Weekly', except for a few breaks during foreign travels, had Shankar failed to produce his usual weekly quota of cartoons—the cover page, three to four political cartoons, and the "March of Time" centrespread comprising nearly nine to ten individual cartoons. There was a break only once, when Shankar was among the journalists who accompanied Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru on his historical visit to the USSR in 1955. With Shankar also went his good friend, Mr. Chalapati Rau.

Mr. Rau vividly recalled their two-month-long trip in these words: "Shankar and I loafed about the USSR and then Europe, for nearly two months. He wanted to move in one direction, and I in another. He liked to move among the people in Moscow, Alma Ata, Zurich, or Paris; I thought I had not gone there to waste time, walking. There could be no end to Shankar's sense of curiosity or energy." Mr. Rau chuckled as he added: "He is such a voracious

vegetarian that the Soviet Government, at Nehru's request, provided him with all possible vegetables.

"It was on our Soviet tour that Shankar emerged as an emphatic speaker," Mr. Rau continued. "He was at first a little hesitant, but later there could be no stopping him. About him, it is difficult to separate things. His head and heart seem one. On his subjects, there can be no better authority or a more eloquent exponent in the world."

Sincere words of love expressed about a friend whom he had first seen as one of India's greatest cartoonists and who had now moved into a totally different sphere—the world of children and their myriad activities!

### **Petra Rozcova (Czechoslovakia)**

*Mr. Shankar impressed me very much. He was very good to us children, and was kind. He tried very hard that we children like India; he wanted us to get to know as much as possible and also to have nice memories for the rest of our lives. He looked after us as if we were his own children. The best of my impressions about Mr. Shankar are his love for children's creativity, his love for children, and the children's happiness. Somebody would think that Mr. Shankar looks after children of foreign countries only. But it is not true. I had very little time to get to know Mr. Shankar, but in such a short time I was convinced that Mr. Shankar's objective is the happiness of all children, and I believe, if it was in his power, he would make children all over the world happy.*

*Another pleasant meeting with Mr. Shankar was at the Hall of Pioneers in Prague. I was very happy that Mr. Shankar remembered me even after such a long time and that was a very nice feeling.*

*I shall never forget the time I spent in Delhi. That one week was the most beautiful time in my life so far. Memories of this one week will be with me the whole life.*

# 10

**S**HANKAR'S horizon further widened in his ideas for children. He had realised that, if properly encouraged and guided, the children of the world could express their innate love of beauty in so many different ways. And for that, more avenues had to be opened for them.

Inspired and fascinated by the gift of a Magyar doll from the then Hungarian ambassador, Shankar hit upon a new idea—he would collect dolls from all over the world!

He wasted no time. He went to Nehru's residence, at Teen Murti House, and met him at the breakfast table. As he told him about his new dream, Panditji listened to him patiently. His nod of approval was the only inspiration Shankar needed to go ahead with his plans. Shankar continued collecting dolls till it became a sizeable collection. The biggest problem was the question of space. Where would he keep the dolls? Besides the family, guests, and visitors, his wife had to accommodate hundreds of dolls! All in their small Babar Lane house. She knew very well how much her husband cared for his prized possessions—"sometimes even more than his own children!" said a family friend jovially.

The dolls were kept carefully wrapped up in steel boxes and had to be aired in turns periodically. Within a short time, several ambassadors came to know of Shankar's passion for collecting dolls. Many of them already knew him as a well-known cartoonist and had a soft corner for his wit and caricatures. And now they began gifting him with dolls of their respective countries. Shankar himself bought many more dolls. Of course, Nehru never failed to present Shankar with any doll he received as a gift.

Shankar was as excited as a child when the number of dolls kept

increasing month after month. But a time came when it was physically impossible to keep the dolls at home any more. They were lying in more than forty trunks. Therefore, they had to be shifted to a godown in Connaught Place which Shankar had rented for the Weekly.

A day came when Shankar felt that he could not keep his joy and happiness merely to himself, his family, and his friends. He wanted the people of India, especially the children, to see these dolls—he wanted them to know of the costumes, traditions, culture, and history of the people of those lands from where the dolls came. He also wanted the children of his country to be exposed to the greatness and beauty of the world.

'Why not hold exhibitions of the dolls in different cities?' he thought to himself one day, as he sat in the verandah of his house, watching his children cleaning and airing the dolls with loving care. He decided to exhibit the dolls, together with a collection of the best paintings done by the children of the world. Once the idea struck him, he wasted no time. He never paused for a moment to ponder where he would get the funds from for such a stupendous task. The meagre earnings from 'Shankar's Weekly' might help him meet the initial requirements. "The rest, we will see as and when the problem arises," Shankar seems to have remarked. He truly was an optimist. He went about arranging the first of such exhibitions in Delhi. The year was 1955. The venue chosen was Western Court. The exhibition attracted large crowds of people—young and old alike. It lasted 15 days, with no sign of the crowds thinning. Mrs. Indira Gandhi was one of the visitors. Shankar met her at the exhibition, and they discussed at length the possibility of a museum to house these dolls. An idea that was to rekindle in Shankar's mind a few years later!

Radhey Lal has been working for Shankar ever since 1949. He was his general factotum, companion, and dog's-body, from the moment Shankar stepped out of his house till he returned in the evening. His dark face lights up with a wide smile when you ask him about his association with Shankar and his mind, like a computer, narrates every single detail, down to the place and year of the event. "In 1955, straight after the first exhibition in Delhi, we went to Bombay with the dolls. The whole family went along, too. The exhibition was held at the Jehangir Art Gallery in the Fort area. It was

a big success! From there we shifted it to Podder College, Dadar.” Radhey Lal paused before he spoke again. “Sa’ab (Shankar) used to be very restless and was never satisfied with anybody else’s work. He liked to do everything himself.” How well he knew Shankar!

Shankar himself proudly recalls the stupendous response to the first ever dolls exhibition of its kind in Bombay. “Throughout the 15 days of the exhibition, there were milling crowds queueing up outside the Gallery, whatever the time was!”

Dolls are his life. Even today, he must see his dolls every day of the year. Even on a public holiday, he would not like to sit at home.

The team of workers knew exactly what Shankar wanted. Setting up of the display boards in the halls and fixing of publicity posters all over the city were all part of their duty. They never disappointed Shankar in their capacity to work. Shankar has always been a task-master. He himself works hard at whatever he is doing, and expects the same from all.

The dolls exhibition was also taken to Calcutta in 1957. It was held at the Government College of Art. The response from the public was heartening. They received it with great enthusiasm.

Shankar later took the exhibition to several other cities in India. When he went to Trivandrum in 1959, he was given a warm welcome. People flocked to see not only the paintings and the dolls, but also Shankar—a son of their soil. Their happiness at seeing this simple, humble, grey-haired man knew no bounds. They were in awe of him!

In 1959, from Trivandrum, he took the dolls exhibition to Madras. The exhibition was held at the Rajaji Hall on Mount Road. Shankar had good friends in Madras to help him. And good vegetarian food was served at the exhibition to all the workers. The exhibition was very popular. The banners for the exhibition were made by the well-known Gemini Studio! With these mobile exhibitions, Shankar became a household name among the children of India.

At Delhi, the International entries in painting and writing came flooding in year after year. In 1950, there were 6,000 entries from 13 countries; in 1952, 13,000 entries came from 35 countries. Sorting them out according to the age groups, sifting the good ones, and finally displaying them in halls for the jury to go round and adjudge the best entries was quite a task. It was an equally difficult task

for the jury—the paintings were so many and so good.

By 1961, there was a steep increase in the number of entries—70,000 from 74 countries! It was not the number of entries that made Shankar happy, but the fact that for the first time, children had been provided with an occasion to express themselves and exhibit their inborn creative talents. It was a pioneering and successful effort by Shankar, and though many countries now conduct similar competitions, India continues to hold the sway in its range and number.

In the words of Mr. C.P. Ramachandran, another journalist closely associated with Shankar: “To watch one of these exhibitions is not just sheer delight, but an electrifying experience. The child’s honesty of interpretation and the candour with which he translates, even his awe and wonder, his joys and sorrows, unconditioned by the conventions of adult society, lend his vision an integrity that no adult can achieve.” And it was to understand this vision of the child that Nehru used to take time off from the affairs of the State and make it a point to go round the galleries, seeing in detail the exhibits of the little five-year-olds, and those of the more self-conscious teenagers. And he never regretted those few hours spent in Shankar’s company and amidst the children’s paintings.

Shankar would repeatedly tell one and all that teachers and elders should not guide or influence the creative work of children. “Let them express their natural instincts—whether it is painting or writing work. They are free from the worries and quarrels of the world,” he would say. “When the child is left free and unfettered, his imagination travels to untrammelled regions. The child is able to express a humanism untouched by our social hypocrisies and pleasant lies. This is the idea I had, behind the organising of the international competition.”

For the children of Delhi, Shankar had a special treat! From 1951 onwards, he has been holding an On-the-Spot Painting Competition every year. In the beginning, the lawns of the Eastern Court would turn into a veritable ‘mela’ of children from the ages of five to sixteen. Later, the venue was changed to the sprawling lawns of Modern School. The children came in their hundreds, excited and happy with their boards, paper and pencils, paints and colours. It was not just the fun of painting, but a haven of delight that the children experienced. Of course, they had had little squabbles between themselves and, in their anger, would often sprinkle paint



*Narrating an incident to Mr. H.N. Bahuguna and Syed Mir Qasim*

*In the company of Mr. Siddharth Shankar Ray and Mrs. Peggy Holroyde*





*With Mrs. Indira Gandhi and Mr. K.P.S. Menon*



*Shared moments with President V.V. Giri*

on each other's clothes and faces. Many made new friends; many were content to concentrate on their own work or admire the ones done by others. Some of the five-year-olds would bawl out loudly, wanting their 'mummy' even before they began any painting! But Shankar, his family, and his team of willing workers and friends are always there to help and supervise the whole show.

The Competition has become an annual event, and is invariably held on a Sunday in February, from 9 to 1 p.m. Children from all over Delhi and the suburbs, as well as the children of the foreign embassies participate. Like the other projects started by Shankar, this On-the-Spot Painting Competition has also gained in popularity. The number of participants went up each year and by the 80's, it was in the region of 15,000! It is a real sight to see the vast playground of Modern School, an ocean of children in brightly coloured clothes, and almost the same number of adults—diplomatically kept out of the arena—straining their voices and eyes to see their own children well-settled; photographers and TV crew running all over, trying to capture some candid shots of the children in their world of colour; horns blaring outside, and the traffic police going berserk because of the massive traffic jam. People often remark that this is the greatest show on earth!

The task of screening and selecting the prizewinning entries was the same as that of the International Competition. The best paintings are selected and displayed at the AIFACS (All India Fine Arts and Crafts Society) galleries, and the children come with their families and friends to show them their masterly efforts!

Out of Shankar's fertile brain popped up yet another idea. "Why not allow the children to conduct the proceedings of the Prize Distribution? After all, they are the VIPs of the day!" And so from 1962 onwards, the function was conducted by children and the prizewinners were received and welcomed by children. The programme was presided over by a child, who would give a speech congratulating the prizewinners. Shankar insisted that the Chief Guest would be either the President of India or the Prime Minister. Children came with their parents or guardians from all corners of the vast country, sometimes from abroad also, to receive their prizes. The prizes of those who could not make it to Delhi were to be received by the ambassadors of the respective countries.

Over 800 prizes are awarded each year. They include the President

of India's Gold Medal for the best painting, and 24 gold medals instituted in the memory of Jawaharlal Nehru, for writing and painting in each age group, besides Silver medals, and other prizes. It is a very colourful event that used to be watched fondly by Pandit Nehru for several years.

Shankar did not stop there.

### **Matthew Williams (Australia)**

*I found him to be an overwhelmingly warm and sincere man. His gentle approach, welcoming smile, and obvious concern for others was clear, and indeed felt on all occasions. I especially noticed his love for children as I, myself a child, saw in him a dignified figure who is able to relate to children on a level of understanding and affection that I and the other children felt and welcomed whole-heartedly. A man of purpose, strength, and determination, his efforts have been appreciated by all who know him, and I am certainly pleased to have met a man who, above all, is human in every sense of the word.*

**S**HANKAR did not stop his creative thoughts from further diverging. His mind was just beginning to gain pace. "Nothing like the satisfaction of hard work," he would say. Over eighty-two years of age now, anybody else would have been making plans for leading a simple retired life, and deriving pleasure in watching the activities of his own children and grandchildren. But not Shankar. He had other plans up his sleeve.

With the increasing interest he was taking in children, Shankar began to realize that there was a dearth of good reading material for children in India. He was greatly concerned about the quality of the few books for children some Indian publishers had brought out. "Children deserve nothing but the best" was his firm belief. He stressed that "the cultural heritage of India must be handed down to the children."

In 1954, he announced through 'Shankar's Weekly' a competition for folk tales of India, with a view to publishing the suitable ones for children. The response to this competition was overwhelming. He received over 500 manuscripts, out of which he retained a few good ones, to be published later as books for children.

Shankar now decided to bring the annual competitions and exhibitions, the dolls exhibitions, and the publishing of children's books under one banner. He got it registered as the "Children's Book Trust". He rented a small area in the barracks of the Theatre Communications Building in Connaught Place. From here, he began to conduct his various activities for children. Since the 'Shankar's Weekly' office was nearby, he could go there on his daily rounds, too.

His ideas for doing more and more for children were growing

manifold, and often he would get irritated with the dingy rooms of his office of the Children's Book Trust. Lack of space cramped the activities of the organization. A number of dolls, which had now increased to 4,000, were living in and out of boxes. The thought of the dolls lying huddled up in trunks, wrapped in cloth and paper, was worrying him. 'Why can't I give them a home, where they could be seen by children?' he thought aloud. The seed had already been planted by Indira Gandhi earlier when he had discussed the project with her during his dolls exhibition in Delhi.

The following morning, he pushed off to meet his mentor and guide—Nehru, whom he used to address fondly as 'Panditji'. Shankar recollects the conversation that followed.

"Panditji, I want to do something more for children. I think I can publish books for them."

Panditji said, "It's a good idea. Tell me, what do you want *me* to do?"

"I want money," Shankar replied.

"Oh, you want money? What do you think you are asking for money?"

"I don't want a gift," said Shankar, "I only want a loan. Can you give it?"

"What will you do with the money?"

"I'll construct a building and establish a printing press and print books for children."

"Shankar, don't be a fool," shouted Panditji. "You can never be a businessman."

Shankar was adamant. He told Panditji that he would manage the funds himself and got up. But Panditji called him back and said, "I'll strongly recommend your case to the government to give you some money."

Shankar smiled and said, "Thank you, Panditji."

Shankar once again had his way! He obtained the loan and requested the then Home Minister for a piece of land. "The land was allotted to me on the third day," Shankar says proudly. "And we began construction." The plot was on Bahadur Shah Zafar Marg, popularly called the Fleet Street of Delhi. It was flanked on either side by the homes of two newspapers, the 'Patriot' and the 'National Herald'.

At each and every stage of construction, difficulties were encoun-

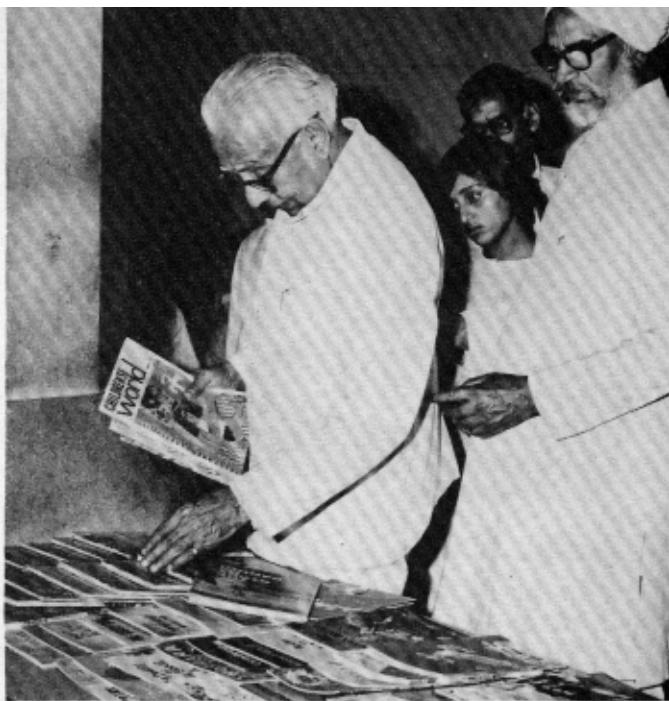
tered, which even Shankar, with all his foresight, could not have anticipated. One was an unexpected rise in the price of raw materials and he fell short of finance. But he was not easily defeated by this. What were these petty little problems when they would ultimately lead to the final realization of his dreams! It was rough going many a time. They were perhaps the most strenuous years of his life, but he did not give up hope. He made requests for loans to various State governments, and some of them obliged with feasible amounts. The Commissioner of Delhi also proved very helpful. At the end of three years the building was complete. All along, the annual children's events and activities continued to take place and were organised from the Theatre Communications Building.

Shankar was getting on in years, but his spirit was still young. He would drive down from Connaught Place and climb all over the building, personally supervising and watching its progress three times a day.

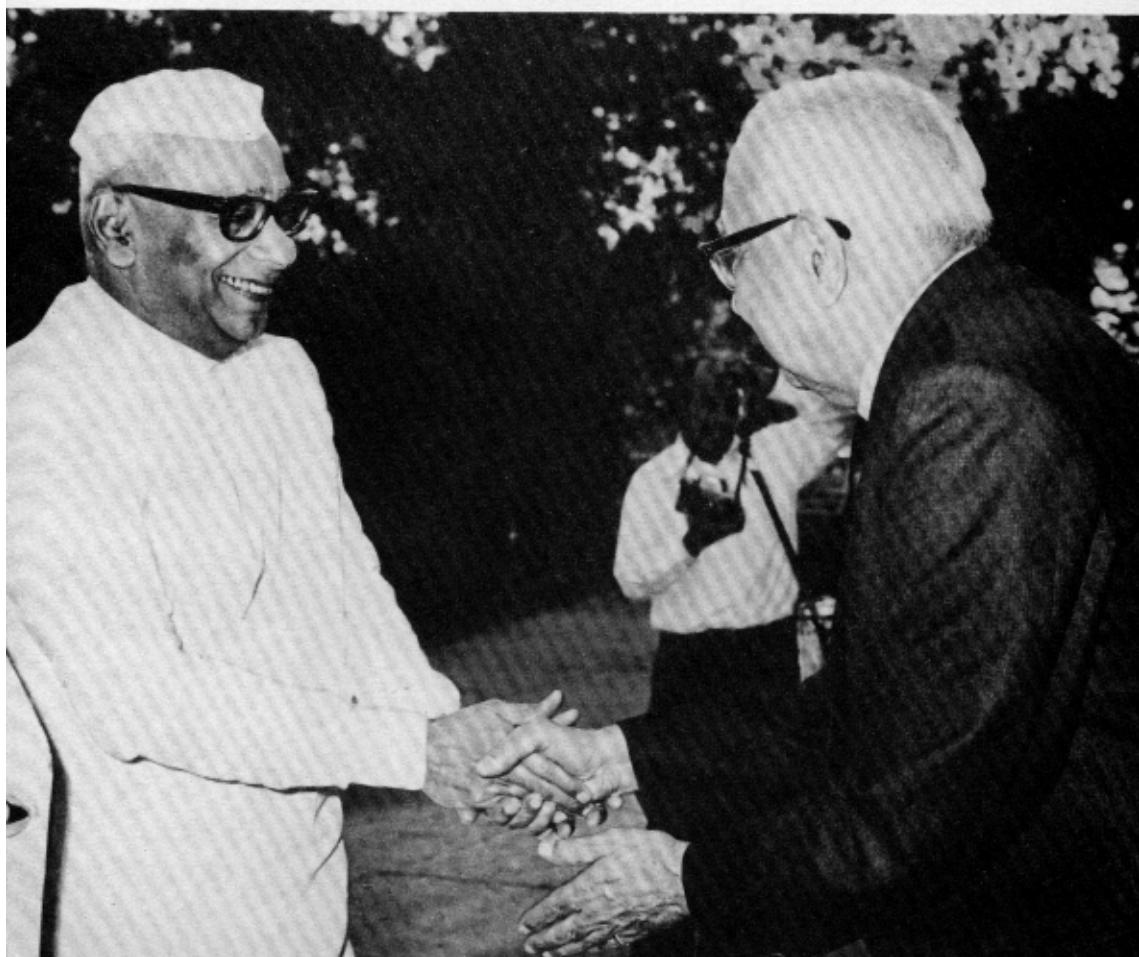
When it was completed, the Trust building looked distinctly different from all others on that street. It could be easily recognized as something *for* children, by the long panel of colourful mural of children's paintings laid out in glazed tiles on the facade. It is impossible to imagine that this great man had built up his large institution single-handed and with a zeal and drive seldom found in many ambitious men. It was a superhuman effort. Little wonder then that Shankar and the Children's Book Trust building have become synonymous. He had seen every brick being laid.

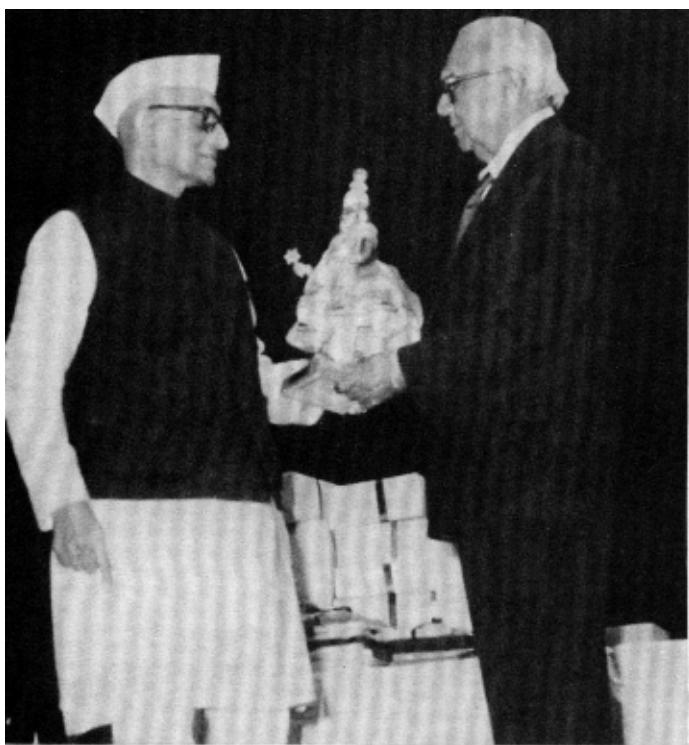
Though an idealist in thought and vision, Shankar was a man with his head on the shoulders—very practical, down to earth, and a planned worker. The idea to publish good books for children had been nagging him. "But how can I give children good books without a printing press?" he had asked himself. He had experienced difficulties with the high printing rates and the tensions and delays which 'Shankar's Weekly' itself had faced. He did not want to go through all these again. Therefore, the first thing Shankar got done was to get a basement constructed in the building to accommodate a printing press. Shankar managed to get loans to purchase sophisticated machinery for printing by both letterpress and offset. The press was named Indraprastha Press. And over the years, it has won coveted awards for excellence in printing and designing—at home and abroad.

*Mr. Swaran Singh, Minister of External Affairs, being shown some children's books.*



*Receiving Mr. Brahmananda Reddy, Home Minister*





*gift of a doll from Shankar*

*Mr. and Mrs. Hidayatullah at the Festival organized for the International Year of the Child,*



Shankar's own favourite haunt in the whole building is the International Dolls Museum housed on the first floor. "Have you seen my Dolls Museum?" he would ask you. And if you were to say "No", he would promptly remark without any fear of hurting your feelings, "You're useless! What have you seen then? Come on, come on, let me take you there." And he would lead you up a wide, majestically winding staircase into a colourful land of dolls. They are not mere costume dolls, but people laughing, working, smiling, and trying to say something about their uninhibited world, from where ugliness and evil has been banished.

There is no equal or larger collection of authentic costume dolls from different climes and countries anywhere else in the world. The backdrop given to the dolls adds a touch of flavour of the place of origin of these dolls—the Kabuki dancers from Japan, the aborigines of Mexico, the Eskimos from the Arctic, peasants from Yugoslavia, or the house-builders from the G.D.R. Arranged artistically in glass cases in the air-conditioned bays of the Museum, the 6,000 odd dolls from nearly a hundred countries beckon all young and old alike. One of Shankar's beautiful dreams had come true! The dolls had at last found a permanent home!

While fondly appreciating Shankar's endeavour to bring so much happiness to so many children, Mr. H.Y. Sharada Prasad, a close friend and associate of Shankar, had this to say after he had gone round the Museum: "When I watched the children and heard their shrieks of delight on seeing these dolls, I thought of one job I would not like to have—that of a doorkeeper here. How could I enforce the closing time and send home all those children who still lingered?"

Shankar felt that another happy corner where children would love to linger, would be a reading room and library. From the time he had decided to publish books for children, Shankar had also approached the ambassadors of different countries to get him children's books of their country. This was mainly to get an idea of the level and standards of children's books in other countries in regard to their writing, illustrations, and printing, to enable him to maintain a good standard of the books he himself would publish. Dr. B.C. Roy Memorial Children's Library and Reading Room (named after the first Chief Minister of Bengal, who too was a great supporter of the children's cause) was established. A large area was provided on the first floor. Besides acquiring some 11,000 books of different

varieties for children, Shankar saw to it that the right atmosphere was created, so that children would enjoy staying in the library for hours together. Lovely paintings done by children cover the walls of the library. A small aquarium, with beautiful coloured fish, keeps them company. There is also a separate corner for the little ones, with lots of toys and games. And as an added attraction, children's movies are shown on second Saturdays of every month. The number of books on the shelves keep increasing, along with new members, who stream in, excited and waiting to grab a book and start reading. Shankar never seems to miss out on anything.

The office of Shankar's International Children's Competition was also shifted to the new building. The Competition continues to be an annual feature, eagerly looked forward to by the organisers and participants alike. And it is a treat to watch Shankar getting excited as the postman brings hundreds of thousands of entries each year.

Shankar was keen that children should know about the culture and life of the people of this vast country in detail, through dolls. When he could not secure authentic dolls from the various States of India, he decided to set up a Dolls Workshop. Production of costume dolls, representing Indian life and culture in detail, was started. The Indian section in the Dolls Museum now has some really beautiful dolls in groups like "Brides of India", "Dances of India", "Tribes of India", "Man and Woman" from each State, and many more, all designed in great detail and finery and made at the Workshop by efficient craftsmen.

To encourage child writers and illustrators, and to give them more in the form of stories, science-fiction, articles of children's interest, and general knowledge, Shankar also started a magazine called 'Children's World' which, in a very short time, gained tremendous popularity with children in India and abroad.

Today, the Children's Book Trust is known everywhere as pioneers of publishing children's books in India. They are exclusive books, easy to read and easy on the eyes, with simple and colourful illustrations and excellent designing and printing to give them a class look. Shankar's aim to bring out these books was to enable the children of India to have a better appreciation of India's cultural heritage. The books meant for the 4-16 age-group range from mythology, legends, folk tales, history and biography to adventure,

romance, mystery, and fantasy to science-fiction, and books on animals and birds, and picture-books for the tiny-tots. To date, the Trust has published over 160 titles in English; almost all have been translated into Hindi, and a selected few in some of the regional languages of India. Several titles have also been translated into foreign languages. "Children must read good books," Shankar has always stressed. He has produced good books and has proved his point, as one can see from the response to and sale of these books.

Today, Shankar is also the founder of the Association of Writers and Illustrators for Children (AWIC). It is an enthusiastic body of over two hundred members from all walks of life—some who are already authors and illustrators of children's books and some who are still striving to become one, but all with a sincere objective—to produce good books for and propagate good reading habits in the children of the country.

Recently, Shankar declared open the AWIC Children's Library Scheme, initially with ten centres in different parts of Delhi, to be run by the members of the Association. "More and more good books should reach out to the maximum number of children," is the object of this scheme. "I am old now, to do anything active," he said in a humble voice, "but I can visualize this library scheme gaining popularity and expanding widely in all parts of the country, and I am proud of your efforts. My blessings are with you, and my only plea to you is—continue with your efforts. There is never an end to all that you can do for children." Noble words from a noble man. It is an honour to be associated with him and his thinking.

It has taken fifty long years of hard work to complete his mission. And his mission has been successful—a result of the long and patient endeavour of a man who would not be defeated.

When I asked him, "How do you feel about your success?" he reacted sharply: "Success, did you say? What is success to me when the one person who would have been proud to share it with me is no more with us today? One who would have bounced gaily up the stairs to see the dolls from different parts of the world? One who would scowl at our errors, and smile when something in us pleased him?"

Shankar turned away. Was there a tear in his eyes?

"So what else could we do," he continued, "than to name this building after him and seek to draw inspiration from him to provide

the best for children?"

And so it was—this imposing building that houses the Children's Book Trust—named "Nehru House", in fond and revered memory of Shankar's guiding light.

### **Sunil Kuruvilla (Canada)**

*My association with Mr. Shankar was somewhat brief yet highly memorable. In 1980, my family and I embarked on a trip to India. Before our departure, I learned I had won a prize for a short story I had submitted to Shankar's International Children's Competition. I went to New Delhi and "Nehru House" to receive more details. There I met Shankar for the first time, and immediately my impressions were favourable. He took my father, my mother, and myself on a tour of his Dolls Museum, and he insisted that we joined him at lunch, despite the fact that it disrupted his planned proceedings of the day. Later in the year, I returned to Delhi to accept the Vice-President of India's Gold Medal. I was accommodated in a beautiful five-star hotel, and our daily activities consisted of guided tours and lavish meals. Shankar planned all the proceedings and he met with us throughout the day. In these encounters, he was always warm, friendly, and unassuming. His extravagant annual Children's Book Festival adds further proof to the fact that Shankar still remains a child at heart. Like the king of an empire. Shankar has devoted his life to children, as his dolls museum testifies. All his actions bring joy; be it the simple laughter at a joke or the pride he holds in his Festival. My father had already told me of Shankar's merits as an accomplished journalist and cartoonist, but I feel lucky in that I was exposed to the warm, personal side of the man. All in all, Shankar is a man to be admired by both the young and the old.*

# 12

IF one feels that the completion of “Nehru House” and the realization of his various projects for children would have finally given Shankar time to sit back, it will be far from right. Though physically he could now relax, as all running around was over, mentally Shankar never gave himself a chance.

He had founded the Children’s Book Trust with the main object of giving good books to the children of India. In his view, “Good books are the first necessities, if this generation of Indian children are to make a breakthrough in the present tough competitive world. Children need the very best,” he asserts over and over again. It is interesting to know how Shankar himself began writing for children.

“I had a publishing house, but no good manuscripts. Anyway, not of the standard I had expected. So I began writing myself,” he said with a smile. This accidental overture has, however, enriched the bookshelves of thousands of children all over the country and elsewhere. Shankar is today an author of over fifty books for children, four of which he has illustrated himself. Amongst his most popular books are ‘Life with Grandfather’, ‘Mahagiri’, ‘Mother is Mother’, and ‘Hari and Other Elephants’. Besides these, ‘Tales from Indian Classics’ in three volumes, ‘Treasury of Indian Tales’ in two volumes, and ‘Stories from Panchatantra’ published in a set of four volumes and also as a deluxe volume, are a treat for every child.

Thus, while his regular work of drawing cartoons for the Weekly continued, Shankar also took to writing for children, as passionately as the former. Once he began getting the easy flow of words, there was nothing to stop him. This is what he once told a group of budding writers who were members of the Writers Workshop: “There



*With Mr. Atal Behari Vajpayee*



*With Mr. Y.B. Chavan, Defence Minister*

*Mrs. Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya in conversation with Shankar Dayal Sharma*





*Shankar sharing a happy moment with children*

*All set to perform at the Festival of the Year of the Child'*



is nothing in this world that you cannot do. You have only to take interest in whatever you are doing. I want you all to take that interest. That is the only way you can succeed. Just go on writing. Try again and again. I wanted to write and I tried. I do not know whether I am qualified to be a writer," he added humbly. "You may fail a hundred times, but the hundred and first time, you are bound to succeed. The main effort is to take interest—a passionate involvement in whatever you do!"

One young writer was curious to know why Shankar took to the children's cause and did not decide to join politics, as he was so closely associated with most of the national leaders and politicians of the country. Shankar had a prompt reply in store. "Politics is dirty, a waste of time. The future of India lies in its children, and we have to make an honest effort to give them the very best. We have a proverb in Kerala: 'Never put manure at the top of the tree, but at the base'." There was now a determined look on the face of the writer, to attempt writing more for children.

Another cautious writer asked Shankar, "You are the best judge to know what children want. Is there anything in particular that you think should be written for children?"

"No, no," he said, "a child's mind is like a vast ocean. They take interest in everything they read. It is the *way* you write for them which is important. I am often approached by some writers to give them an assignment. But it is for you to decide what you are going to write about."

Shankar himself has written a book in half-an-hour. At the same time he admits, "Sometimes a plot keeps tormenting me and I cannot sleep. But when the idea comes to me, I must write at once, even at the oddest hour. Maybe, the next day, it might not interest me and I would shelve it. Often, I have four to five unfinished manuscripts," he says laughingly. "Sometimes, maybe a year later, I am inspired to complete it, "but with a totally different plot from the one I had originally thought of."

Shankar is a difficult man to please. It takes a lot of effort to impress him. Eventually, he may say, "It is not bad!" He cannot get himself to say, "It is good." But, then, he is miserly with praise even for his own work! When writing a book, he polishes each sentence and he writes and rewrites it innumerable times before he is satisfied that it will read well to a child.

Shankar's most popular book is 'Life with Grandfather'. He has described true incidents, full of pranks as well as little brave deeds, from his own childhood. The reader can almost visualize Shankar once again as a young boy in the small village of Kerala, in the midst of his own childhood companions. The book captivates the reader with its short, simple, straight sentences. Shankar himself has illustrated the book with intense sensitivity. The approach is cartoon-like—the mobile expressions of the characters easily make the reader recognize and identify the person he is reading about. The life in a Kerala village is also well-captured through subtle details in the illustrations. It is not easy to forget the lovable and gullible little Raja—the hero of the book. One will be tempted to pick up the book again and again, and silently laugh at and share the joys of the now familiar 'Shankar'!

Another of his early books that he wrote and illustrated himself is 'Sujata and the Wild Elephant'. It was published in 1965. Shankar nostalgically recalls how he got down to writing and later illustrating this book. "In a Preface to a book on wild life, Panditji has said that we must understand the human qualities in animals. That statement had a great impact on me, and I kept thinking how I could impart this thought to children. So I decided to write a story about animals. Once I decided, it did not take me long." He took it to Panditji and he was the first to read the story. Shankar was a little anxious to know his reaction. Soon Panditji summoned him to his office and, after staring at him seriously for a while, he said, "I want you to give me a promise that you yourself will illustrate this book." "And that's how the book 'Sujata and the Wild Elephant' came to be published," Shankar said with a smile.

Asked which book he thought was his best creation, Shankar replied, "Nothing is best for my satisfaction. I'm still writing. But personally, I like 'Hari and Other Elephants'. Very few people even know, let alone understand, the humaneness of this animal. I got emotionally involved while writing this book. I had read a book in Malayalam with more than a hundred stories on elephants. I evolved six stories out of these. It took a very long time, but the effort was fruitful."

Once Shankar got into the mood of writing, he never turned back. He wrote fiercely as and when his inspiration goaded him. Many of the books he wrote later had themes from Indian classics and folk

tales from all regions of India. "Ours is a land of rich and varied heritage. Our people, our customs, our character—I wanted our children to know all this," said Shankar with emotion.

These noble thoughts of Shankar have vividly been reflected not through the text-books, but by weaving them into stories, simple, full of life, and colour, in his delightful books. His characters feature a wide galaxy of heroes, gods, and goddesses; simple folk with a clean heart are rewarded, and wicked ones are punished for their bad deeds. The characters are mostly animals, birds, and little children. Though Shankar has illustrated only four of his books, he has not only supervised each and every book he wrote, but all the books published by the Children's Book Trust. He gets involved with the making of a book, from the beginning to the very end, and his standards are exacting. He has to be wholly satisfied with the illustrations drawn by the artists. Quite often the artist has to toil over a single illustration so many times that he almost gives up in despair. But, then, Shankar guides him and prods him on, saying, "You will get your reward and fulfilment when you see the final result." If he does not like a particular illustration, he will not even allow it to be touched up to make it look better. He would rather have it drawn afresh. His insistence on perfection and not just a compromise to what should be drawn has tremendously improved the style and vision of many artists.

For over two decades now, Shankar has been at the helm of affairs of the Children's Book Trust. He is still writing a number of books for children and churning out new ideas as he reclines in his study. His spacious study at the end of a long corridor on the first floor of Nehru House reflects the character of the man in all his moods—creative in the decor, with beautiful objects of art decorating the place and yet, an organized and practical room, just like any of the tasks taken up by Shankar. This room has seen Shankar in all his moods—his happiness at receiving writers, illustrators, dignitaries, and well-wishers, his enthusiasm over pushing forth a project that had taken form in his mind, sad over the loss of a friend or when he is let down by someone he had trusted; his feverish days of cartooning for 'Shankar's Weekly' or writing the manuscript for a children's book, and his more relaxed days, when he just sat back in his armchair and thought up his next bag of surprise.

### **Fong Mei Li (Malaysia)**

*I saw him first, in the lobby of Janpath Hotel. He had come personally to welcome us and invite us to see the Book Fair where there was an exhibition of Shankar's International Children's Art, and where we were going to receive our Gold Medals. I was fourteen years old then.*

*He impressed me very much with his dignity and nobility. He spoke very kindly to all of us gathered at the lobby and he put us all at ease—children who had come from almost every corner of the world to New Delhi on 15th November, 1979, through his generosity and interest in education and art.*

# 13

**S**HANKAR will be 83 this year. He has led a full life, with no regrets whatsoever. Right from his early childhood, which was restless and full of dreams, through to his high school and college days, filled with exciting activities, and later all along his hectic and varied professions, Shankar had no dearth of friends. In fact, he liked company. From the time he was a little boy, he had this great quality of sharing whatever he had—even his happiness! His excitement at achieving something was best shown by him, by ringing up his friends, colleagues, his family and other relatives, and collecting them all together at his house, to celebrate the event. He wanted people around him to share his happiness.

That leads one to finding out the kind of celebration he had in mind—always a lot to eat and drink! The food also had to be typically ‘Malayalee’ which, Shankar claims, is “one of the best in the world”.

During his college days, any celebration meant taking a whole gang of friends to the canteen or, if he had enough money, to a hotel, and treating them generously to their fill. Some jealous persons even had the cheek to complain sneakily about this to his grand-uncle. But Grand-uncle only laughed when he heard of it. “Shankaran has always been like that from the time he was that high,” he would say, trying to measure two feet from the ground.

After he got married, it was his wife’s turn always to be prepared to serve, sometimes even an ‘army’, at very short notice. But Shankar had so much confidence in her that everything would be ready on time and nothing would run short. Her friends and relatives admired her for the calm way she conducted the whole operation—from getting fresh vegetables, cutting them in a particular style, organiz-

ing the duties of the cook and helper, preparing the sweet dish, arranging for the drinks, and even setting the chairs. The hectic programme would begin as early as five in the morning, and to all this was added the daily routine of getting the children ready for school, packing their lunch-boxes, and sending them off to school. Often some of his women friends used to reprimand him while they partook of a delicious meal. "Shankar, you are a heartless man. How do you expect your poor wife to work so much all day? She must be really exhausted."

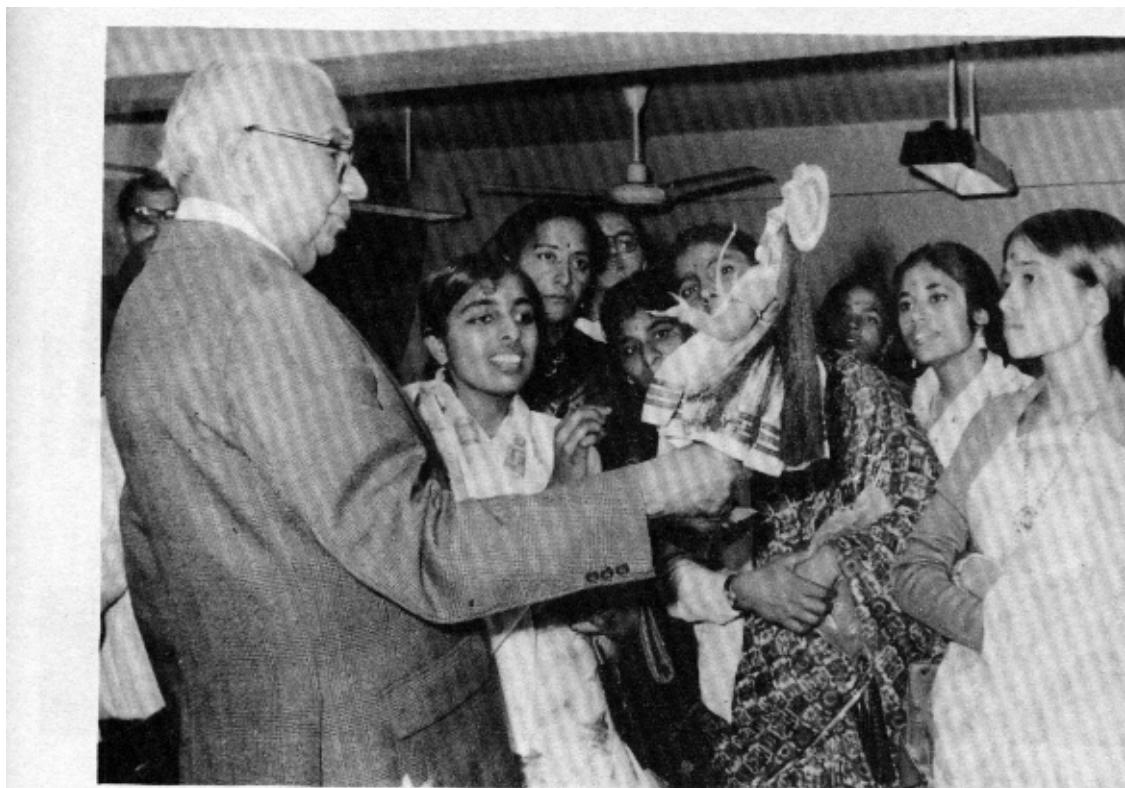
"Oh no, she is quite all right," Shankar would reply, darting a quick look of admiration at his wife. "I did offer to stay back and help her. But she would not take my services. Come on, come on, eat some more." He himself would then serve them.

Shankar once almost went berserk in entertaining when he invited a sizeable group of Russian journalists (who had accompanied Marshal Bulganin and Mr. Khrushchev on their visit to India) to a grand dinner, cooked in Malayalee style—at his house in Babar Lane. He was merely reciprocating the fervent hospitality they had meted out to their Indian counterparts, who had included Shankar and Mr. Chalapati Rau, when they accompanied Pandit Nehru on his historic visit to the U.S.S.R.

Preparations for this gala occasion began a few days in advance. He got special eats flown in all the way from Trivandrum, and the rest of the cooking was done under the supervision of his remarkably calm wife. The food was, as usual, excellent.

To add colour to the occasion, Shankar had also organised a cultural programme for the guests—inviting seven different items by the prizewinning children of the Theatre Festival just held then, in 1951, in the Capital. A raised platform at the back of the house served as the stage, and chairs were rearranged. The foreign guests would always remember this memorable evening spent in Shankar's house.

His greatest happiness has always been in seeing his guests eating, and eating well, too. As his contacts grew wider through the popularity of the International Competitions, his sprees of entertaining also increased. His excitement over receiving a doll for his collection from some ambassador or the other had to be immediately reciprocated—by holding a grand dinner party and inviting many other guests, be they ambassadors, journalists, or politicians. They



*"What do you think of this?" A doll made in the Dolls Workshops  
His passion in life—to feed them all—young adults*





*A view of Nehru House, home of the Children's Book Trust*

*Dr. B.C. Roy Memorial Children's Library*



became his personal friends and would do all they could in their capacity to help him promote the children's cause. Many a time they would forget protocol and just land up at his house and relax. They were all admirers of his 'Weekly', and had a good laugh when Shankar narrated some anecdotes connected with his cartoons.

Here is one of the incidents Shankar once told me. Sarojini Naidu, or 'Akka' as she was familiarly called, once in a while used to go to his house for dinner. She had a weakness for Malayalee food. Once, he had invited her, Indira Gandhi, and a couple of other ladies. He waited for them till eight o'clock. When it was nine, and they still had not come, he rang up Teen Murti House. He was told that they had just left. So he went outside and awaited their arrival. And what did he find? "The ladies were being escorted inside by Panditji!"

Panditji at first reprimanded Shankar for not having invited him also, and then said with a grin that he had come uninvited! And he settled down to a hearty meal. "Akka made a big hullabaloo around the city saying that the Prime Minister of India had gone to Shankar's house uninvited! Such was his love for me," Shankar said with pride.

There never was a fixed number of plates on their dining table—at lunch or dinner time! It has become an accepted fact through the years that there's is an open house and anyone could walk in without any qualms and join the family for a meal. Shankar would welcome them and personally serve them. His children have also got quite used to all this and grown up in an atmosphere where people keep coming and going at all hours.

Another major celebration Shankar planned out very enthusiastically was the centenary of his College at Trivandrum in 1968. He got emotionally carried away by the memories of the four happy years he had spent there, and decided to honour the occasion by inviting all the students residing in Delhi who had passed out of the college, and publishing a souvenir to mark the occasion. The function was held at the Kerala House, and Mrs. Indira Gandhi was the Chief Guest.

Another passion in life for Shankar is playing Bridge. It began from the time he came to Delhi in his early thirties, and he became more interested in it when he joined 'The Hindustan Times'. Shankar's quota of work was one cartoon per day. He would draw

the cartoon, sometimes two as a bonus, and by 11 o'clock, he would be free for the day. Once that was done, Shankar would waste no time. He would climb his bicycle and rush home, to start a game of Bridge. His other friends would be there already, ready and waiting. The session would sometimes continue till late into the night, with a continuous supply of tea and eats, and dinner, and tea again. The four merry players would, however, be oblivious of all this. And Mrs. Shankar would come in every now and then to clear up the mess.

When Shankar became busier with his own work at 'Shankar's Weekly' and later with the Children's Book Trust and its myriad activities, the Bridge sessions became few, finally trickling down to a session every Sunday afternoon. This practice has continued even today. Though his health does not allow him to sit up for many hours continuously, he insists on having his way. He gets excited like a school boy, as early as two days before the actual day of play, and keeps reminding his Secretary to ring up his Bridge-mates and ensure their presence the next Sunday at 2.30 p.m. sharp! He sits through the long hours after lunch, lost to all his worries, happy with the cards he holds, sometimes reprimanding his partner for playing his hand carelessly, sometimes cracking jokes, and sometimes with such a serious expression on his face that one would think he is going to murder someone!

As the years rolled by, Shankar's stamina could not take in so many activities. A couple of major illnesses, including a fall, have reduced his tempo, but that is only physical. His mind is as alert as ever—planning, preparing his next project for children. One of the main causes of exhaustion and fatigue for Shankar was the long hours he spent on drawing cartoons. It became both a physical and mental strain for him to sit through the piles and piles of newspapers and to take cuttings of events which he felt had scope for a good cartoon. He then had to plan the cartoons mentally, and later, stand for long hours with his pen and brush. The strain had begun to tell upon his health.

He was nearing seventy-five, and had to take a decision soon. 'Should I continue with the Weekly, or close it down to devote more time to the Children's Book Trust and its activities?' he asked himself over and over again. And, one day, in May 1975, he announced that he was putting down his pen and brush once for all.

"No more cartooning for me!" he declared without any second thoughts. There was a storm of protests from his admirers, who were heartbroken to see this greatest among cartoonists abandoning his greatest passion in life. Some wondered whether it was because of any paucity of funds and even offered to extend financial help. But Shankar's mind had been made up, and there was no turning back.

Shankar had always had his way, but always with a smile on his face, winning over the desperate looks of the opposite side. Another incorrigible streak in his personality is his fearlessness—he goes ahead with whatever he resolves to do, unmindful of the difficulties and hurdles he might have to cross on the way.

Peggy Holroyde, wife of the then BBC correspondent in India, who worked for Shankar, affectionately talks about this dangerous streak in him. "Shankar is the kind of man to whom you can't say 'NO'. It means that even Nehru was not an exception, nor could he escape when the spirit stirred in Shankar to get things done. I have known the times when Shankar first got his Children's Art Exhibitions under way—and, then, his Music and Drama Competitions, followed by his International Dolls Exhibitions, and finally his Children's Book Trust. If any Ministry crossed his path or lost his papers asking for grants in the 'URGENT' or 'HIGH PRIORITY' trays, then off Shankar would go in his ancient car, chain-smoking merrily and chuckling about 'those blighters', driving straight to Pandit Nehru's house where he seemed to have an easy entry. And he always emerged the victor!"

Shankar loves to be always on the move. During his childhood, he spent hours scrambling through the coconut groves and fields and by the riverside. While in high school, he took to swimming and was quite a champion at that. His free time in college was spent in playing tennis and actively organizing, directing, and acting in plays. He continued this hobby even after going to Delhi, and he was one of the stalwarts of the Kerala Club, arranging shows, organising various activities, and directing plays.

He is also a very harsh critic—nothing pleases him too soon. The production has to be really perfect before he can utter even a small word of praise. And then again, he will merely say, "It was not bad." But the artists who know him well are pleased to hear from him even this.

Now that both age and health restrict his movements, Shankar has taken to a more relaxed life. He takes an early bath and a light breakfast, and is off to "Nehru House" by 8 o'clock, if not earlier. His office is his temple. Not one day in the year does he miss going there, and national holidays are no exception. He is very much at home there, relaxing in his cozy study, going through the newspapers or some manuscript he is working on, roaming about the office and talking to his staff, often cracking jokes with them. He must see the dolls in the museum every now and again and he seems to find something different every day when he goes round the museum. The dolls are his life. He can't bear to see anyone mishandling them even while cleaning the cases. And if by chance, he were to spot any such incident, he will be upset the whole day. His eyes will well up as he expresses his displeasure.

"They are like my children," he says referring to the dolls. "You can't get sick of seeing your children, can you?"

This is what someone in the editorial department had to say of Shankar, when I asked her impressions of him: "He is so lovable and yet, so unpredictable. At one moment, he sweeps into the room all happy and excited about something he has read or thought of, and the next moment, he turns melancholy and moody. But he loves to eat ice-creams!" she adds with a laugh. "And we often get a treat from him! He has led a crusade for the children of India and the whole world, and I admire and respect him for that."

A more serious and sentimental person, who looks upon Shankar as his ideal, had this to tell me: "Shankar's firm beliefs which he often spells out aloud, have been the guidelines of my own career. He believes in 'Absolute love, absolute honesty, and absolute effort'. It is not merely conditional, but absolute. He has aimed all his efforts to doing the best for children and taken the responsibility of seeing to their happiness."

Often, people remark: "He is like a modern Midas. Whatever he has striven to do, he has succeeded." But there is an underlying reason behind it—sincere, hard work, and devotion. Petty problems do not frighten him. He takes them all in his stride.

"He is a large-hearted man," says a young artist endearingly. "So much so, he is able to forgive a lot of bad things in a person, if he sees a speck of good in him."

"He has done so much in life, which he can preen about, but he



*An ocean of colour. A panoramic view of Shankar's On-the-spot Painting Competition*



*Shankar accepting "Padma Vibhushan" from President Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed*

is a man full of humility," says the Librarian of the Children's Library admiringly.

Shankar does have a lot to his credit, but he seldom talks about it. It will be a feather in your cap if you can manage to interview him! "What is there to know about me?" he asks innocently. "You look at my dolls. You see my books. You will then know all about me."

Shankar is not an orator. He is a 'do-er'. He does not speak much, but he shows his thoughts by his actions and expects you to understand what is in his mind. He is an incorrigible idealist who has pursued his dreams and fulfilled them, too.

Deeply attached to his family, Shankar cannot bear to be parted from them for long. His joy at home are his grandchildren, whom he kisses fondly, when they come running up to him, and pampers them with chocolates and toffees, like a typical grandfather. He misses them terribly if they are away from home and sometimes demands that they be called back! He keenly observes the movements and activities of all the members of his family and does not miss out on anything—though he makes a show of being ignorant of the goings on in the house.

"He is troublesome only when he is ill," says his wife. But, then, every great man has also some weakness! "He wants attention all the time," she adds with a smile. And why not? They celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary only three years ago—with a lot of fanfare. It was almost like another wedding! The grand old couple was fondly blessed by their family, friends, and well-wishers from all corners of India and abroad.

"Like my International Competition, my family, too, is international," he says proudly. "One of my sons-in-law is a Chilean from South America, and one of my daughters-in-law is from Czechoslovakia. I also have a daughter-in-law from Gujarat and a son-in-law from Uttar Pradesh. Only my eldest daughter has married from Kerala!"

"I have seven grandchildren between the ages of two and twenty-two," Shankar announces with pride to his guests over dinner, and starts calling out their names one by one. They can hear him from whichever corner of the house they are in and come running down to mark their presence. They stand blushing as their grandfather proudly narrates their achievements and, at the first available chance, scamper off.

An active man with an active mind, he has sped through life with a zest which would put to shame the life led by any of the present day so-called enlightened generation. And that is his only regret about the youth of today. "You people have a lot of opportunities, a lot to offer. But you are not making the best of it. Make an effort, struggle if need be, but be ambitious and optimistic. Life can be dull if you have no goal. But there is no success without hard work. This is my only advice to you."

Is it asking too much from a man who had devoted more than two-thirds of his life giving joy and happiness to the children of today and the youth of tomorrow?

## Mickey Patel (New Delhi)

*A Chinese Emperor, as recorded by legend, commissioned a masterpiece by the greatest artist of the times. On the day of delivery, a hushed audience awaited imperial sanction. The Emperor, upon entry, padded from one screen to the next, absorbing every detail. Every masterly touch that unfolded some grand beast of cosmic proportions. A menacingly magnificent dragon lay stretched taut over the silk. Impaled by some unknown skill. Writhing, twisting, and hissing under the artist's spell. His Imperial Highness was impressed, but a disturbing question remained: How could such a great master have forgotten the eyes?*

*"The eyes?" hissed the old man, bent and shrouded in conspiracy with royalty. "No, never! You never put in the eyes!" he warned, hoarsely. "That dragon would come alive—destroy you, your palace, everything!"*

*Shankar's eyes precede the rest of him. The rest is obedient, responding with quick, dart-like impulses. A pair of glowing, black beacons flash signals to the unsuspecting. Commands ripple through a clean swiftly sculpted face, a quiveringly alert posture, a restless gait. Twin beams that have stayed blistering white, relentlessly through the dash and haze of the times. And in their paths have snared and transfixed the wriggling and floundering of the frail, the pompous, the guilty. Impaled, as hapless drawings.*

*"In the end, there is only love. However, it may be. And they ought to put out the eyes of painters as they do goldfinches in order that they can sing better."—Picasso.*

*Shankar towers over the mangled crossroads of my childhood, boyhood, youth. Disturbing, unsettling, comforting. The shadow remains, sprawled over the length of my forty-third year. I remain privileged to have been singed by Shankar.*

*Guidance was never simplistically linear, encouragement never in black and white. Face to face with Shankar, you were stripped of choice. Retreat was barricaded. You confronted and succumbed to reckless, relentless urging, goading, prodding. Fused with electric urgency. 'Time dare not tick. It was obliged to flash past like some molten stream. The eyes, the comments, the hands, the drawings—ceaseless, vibrant, sharp stabs. Ripping away premises, tearing away art. Making a mockery of authority. A cutting wind, lashing and whipping you to the flank of a precipice. Stark weather—brutal, exhilarating. And when you survived, you reeled toward littered glistening glimpses. Shards of truths lying among the debris. The comfort and the compassion after the storm.*

*"Yes, art is dangerous. And, if it's chaste, it isn't art."—Picasso*

**T**HOUGH a humble and modest person, always shying away from publicity, Shankar's contribution to the world of journalism and the world of children has not gone unnoticed. The first recognition came in as early as 1956, and he has continued to receive distinguished awards in India and elsewhere, too.

In 1956 he received the "Padma Shri" award from the President of India, in recognition of his contribution in the field of journalism. Renowned for his cartoons, he is often described as the "Father of Cartooning in India".

Shankar received the "Padma Bhushan" in 1966, again an award from the Government of India, in further recognition of his sharp wit and caricatures as seen in his prestigious 'Shankar's Weekly'. He was also accredited to the Government as a "distinguished journalist".

In 1976, Shankar was awarded the "Padma Vibhushan", in recognition of his devotion to the cause of children. He is probably one among a very few who have been decorated with all three awards.

Shankar's way of thinking has never been deterred by fame and honour. He is the same old Shankar—ebulliently enthusiastic and disarmingly frank. Tempestuous, temperamental, and often elusive, the word "cannot" does not have a place in his vocabulary, and his simplicity and limpid human kindness often embarrass the pompous and the hollow. There is no better way of showing affection to a dear friend, as Mr. Chalapati Rau had done when he said, "I first met Shankar, a celebrity then, long ago, and though his children and grandchildren say he is over eighty, he is as young to me as he was then. He seems now to be more a monument than a man. But



*Some of the honours conferred on Shankar, through the years*

Shankar pinning a medal on a Hungarian prizewinner in Budapest, 1980





*'The Order of Smile'*—received in Poland, 1980

the moment I go near the monument, the man is there, full of life, as human as ever."

Yes, Shankar has, with his humane thoughts and humanitarian action, won the hearts of children and adults, all over the world. In 1977, he was conferred upon with the "Order of Smile", a unique honour from a committee of Polish children, who choose the year's laureate from amongst the countries of the world. Shankar was the first Indian to receive this honour. Though the award was announced in 1977, it was only three years later that he was able to go to Poland to accept it.

The investiture ceremony took place in Warsaw, the capital of Poland, and the ceremony was unique by itself. It was an exciting event for Shankar. Listen to him: "The ceremony began with the arrival of the Chairman of the Chapter of the 'Order of Smile', Mr. Cezary Lezenski. A child Herald on his right held a spear which had a smiling sun at the spearhead. On his left stood another child holding a tray with the Order, the credentials of the Order-holder, and a rose. The Herald knocked his spear on the floor thrice. 'Attention! Attention! Attention! Is Shankar present?' 'Here I am,' I said and went up the stage, escorted by children. A bugle was sounded. The Chairman came forward to pin the Order (a medal) on my lapel and then touched me on my left shoulder with the rose, saying, 'I hereby proclaim you, Shankar, a Knight of the Order of Smile, and I require from you a promise to stay cheerful, winds and storms notwithstanding, and to bring joy to the children.' I solemnly replied, 'I promise to stay cheerful and keep bringing joy to children.' A child then came up with a tall glass on a tray, challenging me with these words: 'There is sour lime juice in this glass. Let us see how the Chevalier keeps his word.' I took the glass, drank the lime juice, and produced the brightest of smiles I could!"

In 1977, Shankar was invited by the Soviet Government to Moscow, to participate in the meeting, "October-Art-Children", which coincided with the 80th anniversary of the establishing of the Soviet rule.

In 1979, the Hamilton Branch of the United Nations Association in Canada conferred on Shankar a citation and a pin for his dedicated service to the children of the world. The message read thus: "We trust this honour will give some indication of our deep gratitude for your priceless work."

In 1980, Shankar was awarded a Commemorative Medal of the Hungarian Institute of Cultural Relations, in appreciation of his activities and contribution to children.

The Federal Republic of Germany conferred on him the "Order de Saint Fortunat"—a medallion again—in recognition of his dedication to the children's cause.

This was followed by a gold medal from the Government of Czechoslovakia, for the promotion of Indo-Czech Friendship.

In 1980, Shankar was invited as one of the "distinguished guests" at an International Conference of Children in Bulgaria. The Conference, titled "International Children's Assembly, Banner of Peace", was held at Sofia, and as the name suggests, it was "a unison of ideas of peace and friendship amongst the children of the world". More than 3,000 children from all over the world were invited. A group of Indian children also had the honour of being present there. There was an exchange of cultural ideas in the performing arts, music, and writing. The recitals in the presence of distinguished guests was an honour to the children performing and a treat to those watching them. The trip was memorable for all of them.

Recently, in January 1984, Shankar was conferred with the D.Litt. (Doctorate of Literature) by Delhi University during its Diamond Jubilee Celebrations—an honour bestowed on "distinguished persons in various fields".

For Shankar, however, the greatest reward is to see the glow of happiness on the faces of children in the Dolls Museum, who look longingly at the dolls or the paintings exhibited in the large halls!

Shankar's enthusiasm and creative ideas during the International Year of the Child (1979) culminated in a ten-day International Festival for Children, arranged on the wide lawns in front of India Gate in New Delhi. The artistically designed wide gates threw open a world of happiness and entertainment for the young and old alike.

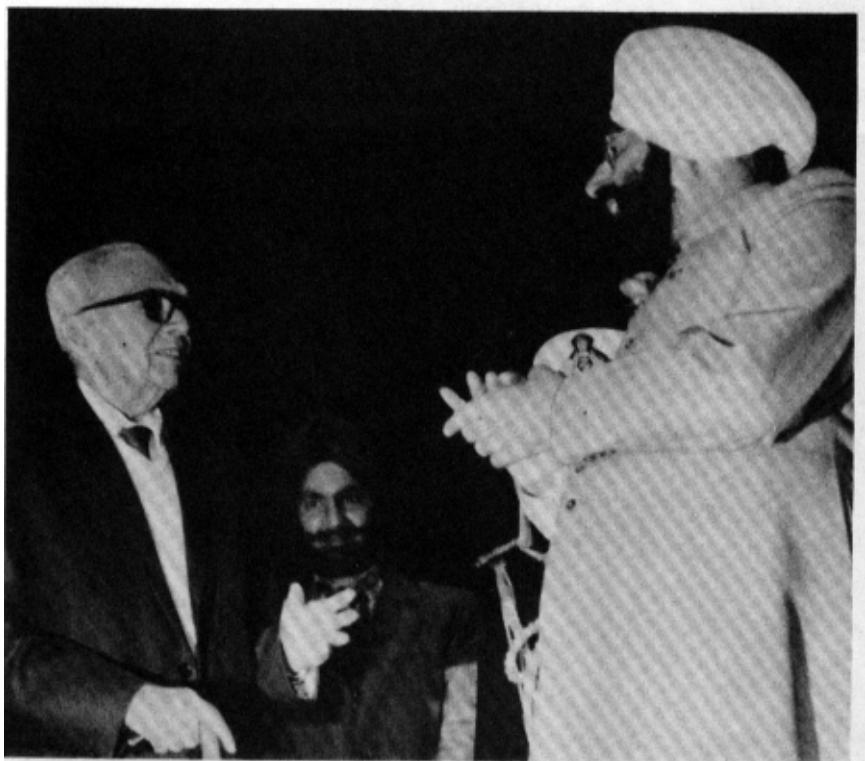
The main activities at the Festival were an International Children's Book Fair, a National Exhibition of Dolls and Toys, a Theatre Festival, a Children's Film Festival, and a three-day Seminar on Children's Literature. A Competition for Writers of Children's Books was also initiated by the Children's Book Trust to mark the occasion.

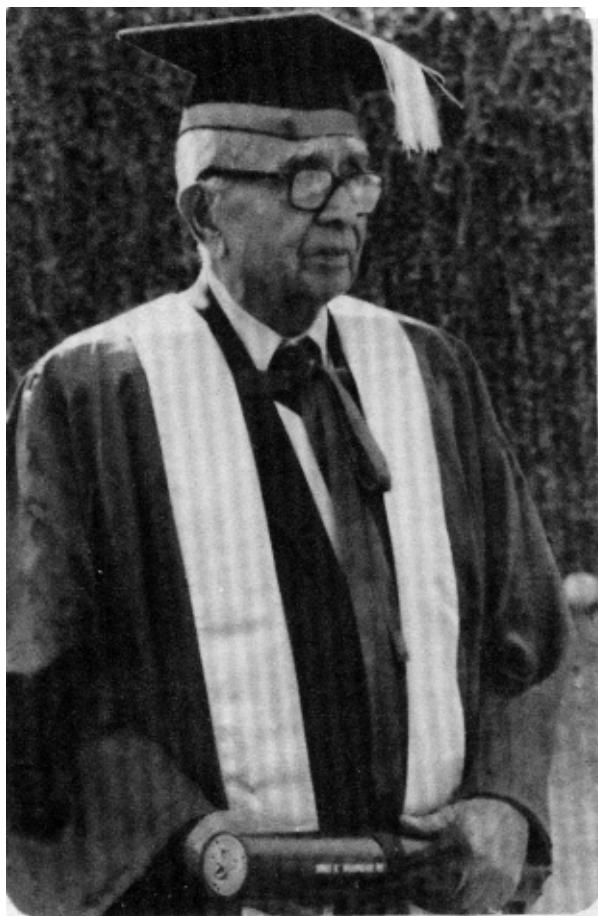
They were ten joyful days of festivity. Bus-loads of children came



*Shankar receiving the Commemorative Medal of the Hungarian Institute of Cultural Relations—1980*

*With President Zail Singh—1983*





*the D. Litt. by Delhi University—  
1984*

*To sit back and relax—with wife Thankam*



from all over Delhi and nearby cities and towns. They had so much to see, to enjoy and to learn. For the first time, they were seeing so many lovely books in so many languages. The Dolls and Toys Exhibition encouraged so many enthusiasts to display their dolls and educational toys. The movies were exclusively for the pleasure of children, but the elders also seemed to throng the place. The Theatre Festival provided a platform for over 5,000 children who enthusiastically participated individually or in groups, representing their school or institution.

As a special treat, about 30 children, who had won gold medals in Shankar's International Children's Competition, were flown in from different parts of the world as guests of Shankar, to receive their prizes in person. They came from Argentina, Australia, Britain, Canada, Czechoslovakia, Greece, Hungary, Indonesia, Japan, Peru, Poland, and Sri Lanka. Some of the children, all aged between 8 and 16, had never once dreamt in their lives that they would be visiting India! Ten days flew away with sightseeing, learning, exchanging of ideas with their Indian friends, watching the Theatre Festival or the movies, and finally receiving their Gold Medals from the President of India. Their eyes were filled with tears as they bade a fond farewell to Shankar and his dream world.

How aptly has he been analysed in an article in the 'Illustrated Weekly of India' in August 1971. "With him, dreaming up things is a hobby, collecting dolls an obsession, writing and illustrating books for children a passion, and exposing human follies and making gentle mockery of them through cartoons a way of life. Shankar does not just dream and stop at that. He chases his dreams till they surrender."

Fifty years have passed by after Shankar arrived in the city of Delhi—fifty years in which he has grown from the staff cartoonist of 'The Hindustan Times' to an internationally known figure; years which have witnessed hardship and struggle; years which have reaped the fruits of those efforts; years which have seen a man moult into an institution!

Though Shankar really does not have much stamina physically, he has one more big dream, which he has all the determination to complete. And what Shankar decides will certainly take a form.

His wish is to establish an International Centre for Children in New Delhi—a meeting place for children of the world. "My idea

is to build an auditorium for a thousand children, dormitories for five hundred and their escorts, a children's library, a hobby centre, a pets corner, art galleries which can accommodate over five thousand paintings, and a playground and a swimming pool and...." He fades away breathlessly with a wistful and far away look in his bright eyes.

**Who hasn't heard of Shankar?**

To the common man, Shankar is the synonym of laughter, made possible through his cartoons and through his cartoon journal, 'Shankar's Weekly'.

To thousands and thousands of children the world over, Shankar's name is familiar through the international competition he has been organising for them for the last 35 years.

To the world of books, his name is familiar as one who pioneered children's literature in India.

Here's an intimate account of the man and his mission by his daughter-in-law, Alaka Shankar who, in the course of her "sittings" with him spread over a year and more, has been able to capture him in all his moods.

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